

**MIDDLE SCHOOL TRANSITION:
BUILDING A FOUNDATION OF EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS**

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The purpose of the exploratory research study was to identify the practices that school principals in the state of Pennsylvania utilize to best support students, parents and school personnel before and during the transition to a middle level school. Research questions were designed to assist in determining what transitional practices schools are using, which practices principals' rate most successful, to what extent transition program activities are aligned to the developmental needs (physical, cognitive, social-emotional) of young adolescents, how transitional practices compare between middle level schools that have and have not been identified nationally as a *School to Watch* and how practices vary by the grade configuration of middle level schools.

Quantitative and comparative coding qualitative analysis was used in the study and results indicated that transitional practice usage is valued by principals, yet implementation of transitional practices varies among schools. Time was reported as the most significant barrier to implementing transitional practices. The majority of practices used by schools are with students, yet practices lack in addressing students' social-emotional needs. Practices aligned to cognitive needs of young adolescents are used more frequently and ranked most successful by principals. Principals indicated self-reported success and that the most common practice used with students prior to transition is an orientation day to the middle school and having an assembly about

building rules, procedures and information is most successful and common during transition. Regardless of grade configuration, transitional practices used with school personnel remain the least frequently implemented by schools. Furthermore, student practices aligned to the physical developmental needs of young adolescents are more frequently implemented by schools that have been designated a *School to Watch*.

I used a web-based survey to gather data to examine the extent to which the transitional practices were implemented in schools. A sample of 96 middle level principals in Pennsylvania responded to the survey. Results from the study support the use of transitional practices with students and parents and educating staff about transition to build a stronger school community and foundation of educational excellence. Implications for professional development and future research are offered.

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PREFACE

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The day has finally arrived. The first day of middle school is about to begin. Brenton, an incoming middle school student achieved good grades and built strong relationships with his peers and teachers in elementary school. But, he has heard that the middle school is a larger building, with more students and higher expectations. Even though he has looked forward to having more freedom during the school day, his confidence about school is low and he has many concerns as he makes his way through the middle school front doors.

During his first day, Brenton gets lost several times, sees very few classmates he knows, struggles several times opening his locker, sits with strangers at lunch and is intimidated by the older students in the building. He also goes through his day confused about how to stay organized and what to do with the assignment notebook given to him. In the spring of last school year he attended an assembly about the middle school and scheduled his classes for the upcoming year. He remembers the middle school guidance counselors presenting information about the middle school and helping him select appropriate classes.

After locating his bus later than he anticipated, he sits alone on the ride home and listens to students discuss their plans to attend the football game on Friday night and a future school dance. He has never been so upset about school and thinks this is only one of many more awful days to come.

Zara also starts middle school today, but in a different school district. She is familiar with the building and knows where to report on the first day because she attended an open house over the summer. As she walks in the front door, a few older students she recognizes from the open house greet her. Heading to her first period class she also reunites with a few new friends she met during a picnic at the open house. Throughout the day, she navigates her schedule seamlessly and is able to open her locker several times without teacher assistance. She also recognizes some faculty members such as the principal, school nurse and a few teachers that she met in the summer.

Zara is happy that she reviewed with her parents all of the school information that was sent home prior to the school year starting. Even though some of it required uncomfortable and sometimes boring discussions about friendships, bodily changes and organizational strategies, she feels knowledgeable about what the middle school will be like. Even changing for gym class is not that much of a challenge.

On her bus ride home, Zara talks with other students about how their first day went. She is excited to share that she cannot wait for day two and knows this will be her best school year yet.

In these scenarios, both Brenton and Zara represent what occurs as students make the transition from an elementary to a middle level school. Unfortunately, each of their transition experiences as they prepare and enter their new school are not alike. Encountering a new environment is not easy. It takes advance planning and preparation to get ready for. Middle level educators are faced with the challenge to teach a unique set of students that are growing every day in numerous ways physically, socially, intellectually and personally. However, middle level educators and schools are inconsistent on how they address these pivotal maturational aspects. A

disparity exists between what middle level schools think they know about transitioning students and what they do to support them.

1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The transition into the middle level comes at a time when young adolescents are experiencing multiple life changes. They are entering a school environment that they are unfamiliar with; they are no longer the oldest students in their school and they are physically, cognitively and emotionally developing more than they ever have in their lifetime. This transition is a difficult experience not only for first-year middle level students and their families, but for administrators and staff as they attempt to help the new arrivals adjust to a very different school routine (Fields, 2002). Although middle level educators are aware of the physical, cognitive and social-emotional development taking place with their students, they vary in their approach to addressing and supporting these needs during the transition to the middle level environment.

Professional development regarding transition needs and practices is limited in the area of middle level transition. Most school personnel and school principals have not been formally trained about transitional practices or more importantly educated on how to use transitional practices to meet the developmental needs of students. Several publications share ideas of transitional practices, but to school personnel and school principals these resources serve more in the capacity of a resource menu to select and choose practices from. It is extremely rare to find an outline of a middle level transition program that has been aligned to meet the developmental needs of young adolescents. School personnel commonly are directed by school administration as to what transition activities the school will provide. However, some teachers take it upon

themselves to provide additional transitional support in their classrooms. In either situation, there is no logical reason for the practices that are chosen and implemented other than personal preference, available resources and time commitment. Therefore, an inconsistency in meeting the developmental needs of transescent students exists at the middle level.

Many students and parents fear the move to the middle level and transitional practices hold the power to diminish those feelings. Yet, schools are aware and still struggle to address these feelings. Siehl and Gentry (1990) state, “Counselors, teachers, parents and administrators have always observed that students become anxious, express school related fears and suffer academic difficulties in the transition from elementary to middle/junior high school” (p.20). Some may call transition “the perfect storm” but in reality, this is a challenge middle level faculty face on a yearly basis. The response is varied and there is no agreement on best practice. For this reason, it was important to explore what middle level schools are doing to support students during transition. The transitional practices that are used in schools and how they align to the developmental needs of transescent students identified that several connections and gaps that exist.

Incoming middle level students’ needs are vast and I would argue, too important to leave to chance. A strong focus on middle level education occurred in the 1980’s which transformed junior highs to middle schools. It was at this time that schools also began utilizing transition activities to support incoming students and their families. Research about the effects of transition and transitional activities surfaced in the 1980’s and 1990’s (e.g. Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, & Flanagan, 1993; Eichhorn, 1980; Hertzog & Morgan, 1998; National Middle School Association, 1995; Weldy, 1995). During these two decades, educators became more cognizant that the middle school years build a critical foundation for student’s future

academic and social successes (National Middle School Association, 1995; Schumacher, 1998; Weldy, 1991). The research and emphasis about middle schools continued to eventually prompt the Association for Middle Level Education in 2011 to constitutionally change the term middle school to middle level. For this reason, the term middle level will be used in this research to describe this level of schooling.

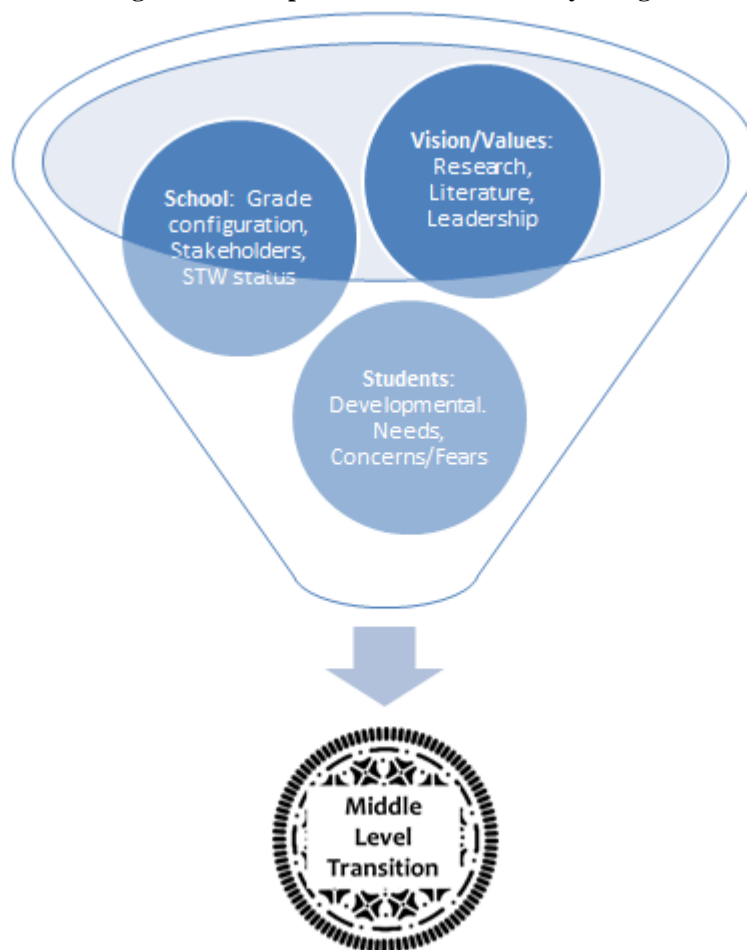
Since then, some schools have selected or developed various transition practices and programs tailored to meet the needs of their students, parents and staff. Not knowing how school transition programs are structured or who is currently using some form of transitional support for incoming students, a need existed to explore what transitional practices are being used in middle level schools, and specifically, what practices are used to address the unique developmental needs of young adolescents. It was equally important to identify the extent to which middle level personnel are prepared to accommodate transitioning students and how parents and school personnel are supported as well.

The conceptual framework that informed the study design is featured in Figure 1. A motivational motto I use professionally with students and staff to describe this unique stage of schooling is “The best is in the middle.” Because the filling in foods is usually the most anticipated and favorite part, I use a connection between various foods such as a grilled cheese sandwich, filled doughnut and, as pictured in Figure 1, an Oreo cookie to explain that middle level schooling is the best level of schooling in a child’s educational career.

Just as there are specific ingredients used to bake the most ideal Oreo cookie, there are specific components included in middle level programming that influence how schools operate. Looking at Figure 1, the students, school and the vision/values of the school represent the key ingredients to create a complete middle level transition program. Students are listed as the first

influence added to the mixture because they factor into every programmatic decision that a school makes. Secondly, the school building plays a role in the development of school programs. Thirdly, the vision and values that a school creates and operates under determine and plan goals and priorities. The concepts listed within each of these represented areas were explored in my research to determine the extent of their importance and influence.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework – Study Design



The literature suggests that school transitional practices are not a “one size fits all” intervention. They are expected to be differentiated based upon the varied physical, cognitive and social-emotional developmental needs of young adolescents and the natural differences in

school settings. Because we do know a good amount about adolescent developmental needs, it is valuable to understand what practices are used by schools and lay the groundwork for a successful entrance into a middle level school. Having awareness of them can only strengthen what schools provide. This study focused on identifying the middle level transitional practices that are used in public Pennsylvania middle level schools. The results describe what is currently taking place in participating schools. By having a deeper understanding of this, I established a direction to inform middle level educators of best practice, suggest what specific support is needed during the transitional period for students, parents and school personnel and describe implications to further support practice, discourse and research related to this topic.

1.2 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Transition is the process that all involved stakeholders experience as students move from one level to the next, rather than a single event that happens to a child (Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000). Research in the field validates the importance of transition activities, but discloses varying degrees of transitional practices used by middle level schools to support incoming students, their parents and school personnel. Some schools have a few or no activities, while others have detailed plans that span across a school year and involve and support various stakeholders. According to Siehl and Gentry (1990), a transition program brings together administrators, students, parents and teachers in a process that addresses personal concerns and strives to meet academic objectives.

Currently, few studies have formulated a comprehensive listing of different types of activities that are utilized by middle level schools during the transition period. I am interested in

finding out what middle level schools and school personnel in the state of Pennsylvania do to make the transition from an elementary school to a building housing middle level grades easier for students and parents. Specifically, I want to understand the extent to which the practices are used by school principals and school personnel to best support young adolescents during the transition to the middle level. By closely examining the programmatic details of activities and events of transition programs from middle level schools in the state of Pennsylvania, an understanding about the extent to which specific transitional practices are used, and which practices are viewed as most effective when used can come to fruition.

An additional element in this study compares the transition practices of Pennsylvania middle level schools that have been identified as a *School to Watch* with those who have not. The Pennsylvania *School to Watch* recognition was developed in honor of Dr. Donald Eichhorn, who is best known for his development of the middle school concept (Manning, 2000; NMSA, 2003). Before partnering with *School to Watch*, the Pennsylvania Middle School Association annually presented the Don Eichhorn Award to Pennsylvania middle level schools that successfully implemented middle level practices and embraced middle level philosophy from 1992 to 2006. The *School to Watch* program was nationally established in 1997. In 2008, the state of Pennsylvania partnered with the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform to create the Pennsylvania Don Eichhorn Schools: *School to Watch* program.

Schools that are interested in becoming a *School to Watch* are required to participate in an application process. Schools must initiate the process themselves and are not selected to participate. Schools that choose to complete an application may then be selected for a visitation by the state team who then determines if the school is eligible to receive the designation. A school that is designated a *School to Watch* maintains that title for three years. After three years,

they must apply for re-designation and must successfully complete the application and visitation process. Overall, because the *School to Watch* recognition is a self-selection process, it does not represent the only top-performing middle level schools in a specific state. It does recognize top-performing middle level schools that are willing to engage in the extensive review, evaluation process and further commitments associated with the program.

A school that has been designated or re-designated as a *School to Watch* has been evaluated and named as a high-performing middle level school by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform. These schools have been identified as top-performing and serve as models of school excellence for other middle level schools to use as a resource. Schools apply to be a *School to Watch* and are evaluated through their application and a site visit. The criteria used for the evaluation is divided into four sections, academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity and organizational structure. Schools that are identified as a *School to Watch* excel in all four areas.

Transition programs are a specific focus of the evaluation process. On the evaluation rubric, in the Organizational Structures category under the fifth criteria, the evaluation rubric reads “The school is not an island unto itself; it is a part of a larger educational system (i.e., districts, networks and community partnerships).” Detailed evidence in relation to the criteria lists, “Deliberate vertical articulation and transition programs exist between feeder elementary schools and destination high schools.” Schools identified as a *School to Watch* are rated high, achieving a score of four in this area because the practice is completely implemented, systematic and coherent by all educators across the school.

The *School to Watch* schools have been thoroughly evaluated and recognized for their well-structured and purposeful efforts to support students in the middle grades. They are of value

to this study because they have been identified for their use of best practice, including transition efforts. Because of their state and national designation as a *School to Watch*, they have been recognized for their strong transitional practices in place. Therefore, it is valuable to investigate how their comprehensive transitional practices compare to schools that have not been identified as a *School to Watch*.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

A survey design was utilized to gain insight on what transitional practices are presently utilized in middle level schools across the state of Pennsylvania. The following research questions were explored through a quantitative analysis process using middle level administrator responses and feedback. The study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What transition activities do Pennsylvania middle level schools implement for students, parents and school personnel before and during the first year?
2. Which middle level transitional practices do principals rate as most successful?
3. To what extent are middle level transition program activities aligned to the developmental needs (physical, cognitive, social/emotional) of young adolescents?
4. How do transitional practices compare between middle level schools that have and have not been identified nationally as a *School to Watch*?
5. How do transitional practices utilized with students, parents and school personnel vary by the grade level configuration of middle level schools?

Descriptive research methodology was used for the study. This design enabled me to explore and describe current transitional practices that are used by Pennsylvania middle level schools. It also determined if a correlation existed between high performing middle level schools (schools identified nationally as a *School to Watch*) and the transitional practices that those schools use. A survey, that I personally designed, was used to collect data from middle level principals in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Analysis and synthesis of these data described averages, variability, and relationships that exist amongst the responses. Statistical tables and figures were created to visually present findings and score distribution. Additionally, qualitative analysis was used to examine data from the open-ended questions. Constant comparative coding was used to identify themes and patterns.

1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Today's middle level schools are facing their own transition. There are continual changes occurring in the K-12 schooling system that are threatening the middle level core values. School districts, including middle level principals and school personnel in Pennsylvania are feeling the pressure to implement common core curriculum, adapt to a new evaluation system, maintain programs and activities with budget cuts and continue to perform with high achievement while showing recurrent growth. With multiple aspects of the educational environment and profession demanding attention, the focus on student developmental needs, especially in regards to the students' transition to middle level has become clouded. It is imperative that transescents' do not get lost in the transition. As Wormeli (2011) asked, "If high school success, navigating the larger

world, and discovering the direction we want our lives to take all have roots in young adolescence, why would anyone leave the transition into this impressionable phase to chance?” (p.48). Middle level students and their developmental needs are the foundation of how middle level schools operate. Therefore, they need to remain a top priority and be catered to through numerous interventions by professionals who work with and understand this schooling level best.

Schools that contain middle level grades have varied name distinctions. Because the middle level encompasses several grade configurations, the focus is not on the designation that a building operates under, but the students who are being educated. Therefore, middle level schools can operate under different titles, including names such as middle school, junior high and intermediate school. The philosophy of the school district and the practices, master schedule and organization directed by the principal of the building is what generally distinguishes the school under a specific title and operational format.

The middle level belief and movement is a result of years of research, feedback from thousands of stakeholders and a legendary vote from membership of the National Middle School Association (NMSA), now the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE). The new name was a constitutional change and was certified by the Board of Trustees in June 2011. The prior name that served the organization for over 35 years supported the implication that the organization only served middle schools. The association was founded by individuals who developed the middle school concept, but the concept is applicable and used in schools of various middle level grade configuration. The concept was maintained as a foundation of the association and the new name represented the entire field of middle level education, supporting students that are ten to fifteen years-old and educators who work with them, regardless of the name or grade configuration of the school. For this reason, the term middle level will be used as

language throughout the study and schools of varied middle level grade configurations will be included in the research.

Middle level schools are agents of change. This specific level of schooling prompts students, parents and school personnel to navigate the educational environment through a new lens in order to meet and address the unique needs of the students. It prompts students to mature physically and emotionally, take on more independence and responsibility, and achieve higher academic expectations (Akos, 2002; Akos & Galassi, 2004, National Middle School Association, 2010; Schumacher, 1998). Middle level schools prompt parents to release some of their school involvement and adopt a new role at home (Akos & Galassi, 2004; National Middle School Association, 2010). Educators are prompted to balance rigorous curriculum and teach skills to foster development of the whole child (Akos & Galassi, 2004; National Middle School Association, 2010; Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2009; Wormeli, 2011). So much change often causes a considerable amount of stress and anxiety during and throughout the transition to the middle level (Akos, Queen & Lineberry, 2005; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Students and parents worry about adjusting to the new environment, peer relationships and academic expectations while school personnel worry about connecting, supporting and preparing students and their families (Akos, Queen & Lineberry, 2005; Baker & Narula, 2012). Simmons and Blyth (1987) have identified multiple factors that contribute to the stress of the transition to the middle level, including increased academic demands and social comparisons, exposure to unfamiliar peers and teachers, and practices that fail to meet early adolescents' developmental needs for autonomy and self-management. Every student, parent and educator is unique and therefore is affected by the transition to middle level in his or her own way, but all will face a challenge at one point or another. It is important for middle level schools to support the transitional change.

As a former middle level teacher and current middle school principal, I have personally witnessed the struggles on behalf of all stakeholders who are associated with the transition from elementary to the middle level. I have also observed the power that transitional practices hold, As a professional who operates with a growth mindset, I find it intriguing to explore middle level transition practices to uncover the practices schools are utilizing during the transition from an elementary to a middle level school. The research I conducted on this topic is helping me revise current practices and develop new transitional activities for students and parents who are entering my building. This benefits the school district as well because students and parents can be more comfortable in the secondary school campus setting, obtaining more knowledge about school practices and policies, resulting in an increase in confidence about the middle level experience and function at a higher-level academically and socially in the school setting.

This research bridges the gap between transitional practices and student developmental needs. As a regional board member for the Pennsylvania Association for Middle Level Education (PAMLE), I look forward to sharing my research findings with middle level principals and school personnel, to provide valuable information to change, enhance and challenge middle level transition programs. My research can influence increased communication between educators in the elementary and middle level setting as well as positively impact student achievement and retention.

The results of this study have significance for both school personnel and parents. Better understanding of the transitional phase that students and their families experience during the move to the middle level may improve schools and have a positive impact on stakeholders. Information that was gathered from this research has been made available to other middle level schools in order to support their efforts pertaining to transition. Educational leaders, especially

principals, are able to use the results of this study to review their current transition program, gain new ideas and implement a purposeful and developmentally-aligned approach to better aid students and families during the transition to a middle level school.

2.0 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1 INTRODUCTION

“Most people do not resist change. What we resist is transition. Change is a situational shift. Transition, on the other hand, is the process of letting go of the way things used to be and then taking hold of the way they subsequently become. In between the letting go and the taking hold again, there is a chaotic but potentially creative “neutral zone” when things aren’t the old way, but aren’t really a new way yet either.” (Bridges, 2001, p. 2)

Everyone faces one constant in life, change. Change presents itself in many forms, often taking us by surprise and causing an individual to experience extreme feelings, such as happiness or sadness. Change can be positive or negative. The shift from what people know and are comfortable with to the unknown holds power to excite us and frighten us. Because of the uncertainty that exists when change happens, it is common for many to have feelings of anxiousness and fear. This often occurs as students experience the change from elementary school to a middle level school. As much as anyone tries to resist it, the change and loss of the previous school environment is inevitable. Following Bridges (2004), it is actually not the change that causes a wave of emotions, but the transition and loss taking place. The move

demands students and parents to let go of what they experienced in the school setting prior and embrace a new environment that is very different from the past.

Kraft-Sayre and Pianta (2000) define transitions as the process that all partners experience as students move from one level to the next, rather than a single event that happens to a child. Furthermore, transition is a process not a one-time event (Borland, 2008; Hertzog, 1998). The middle level environment is notorious for being one of the most significant transitions that transpires during a student's academic career. This is also because young adolescents are concurrently experiencing a plethora of developmental changes. Because changes are occurring with their bodies, minds, relationships, and school setting, students struggle as they transition into the middle level. That same stress also transfers to parents and educators as they try their best to support the students. Leading researchers have investigated the connection between adolescent development and the change in school setting, identifying that a stressful conflict exists (Akos, 2002; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eichhorn, 1980; Manning, 2002; National Middle School Association, 2002; Weldy, 1995). To manage the stress of both changes there is a strong need for developmentally appropriate transition activities.

The transition to a middle level school can cause student's academic performance and attitude towards school to transform drastically. Therefore, it is important for middle level schools to offer several transitional practices throughout the year to help students and their families adjust. The practices also help educators connect to and continue supporting students. Providing students with the means to have successful transitions can change an entire school culture from disjunctive and frightening to supportive and welcoming (Campbell & Jacobson, 2008).

According to leading scholars in middle level education, an appropriate transition program is an essential feature of an effective middle level school. Positive outcomes from a transition program can be attained through the collaboration of multiple school stakeholders and an all-encompassing period of time. Effective and comprehensive transition programs help build a sense of community, respond to the needs and concerns of the students, and provide appropriate, faceted approaches to facilitate the transition process (Schumacher, 1998). To create and implement an effective and comprehensive transition program, there needs to be a common understanding of the basic components and in some cases a mind shift in the commonly held beliefs about what those components mean and how they are best integrated into the transition process (Campbell & Jacobson, 2008).

Having a structured and purposeful transition program in middle level schools is well-supported by various educational and political leaders and organizations such as the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the Association for Middle Level Education, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development and the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform. All agree that educators need to provide age-appropriate programs to help students as they transition to the middle level.

The scenarios of Brenton and Zara at the beginning of chapter one depict the varied degrees of transition intervention taking place in today's middle level schools. Brenton and Zara's adjustment to middle school in the first month will continue to remain different. The differences exist because students mature at different rates (especially males and females), their personalities differ and they each engaged in assorted transitional practices that varied in effectiveness.

A variety of transitional approaches are in existence; some aligning to transescent developmental needs, leaving other needs unaddressed. There is no one perfect transition model, however, research validates that a commitment to helping students transition is critical for supporting students' adjustment to a new school. "A sound transition program can directly influence an adolescent's formation of an identity as an active participant in the learning process and as a successful student" (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000, p.6). Many components can influence a student's successful transition into the middle level. A schools response to addressing developmental needs supports the transitioning child. The more varied and extensive the articulation program, the greater the success students will experience during their first year in a middle level school (Mac Iver, 1990). This literature review focuses on 1) the history of middle level transescents, 2) the developmental needs of middle level students, 3) developmentally appropriate transition practices.

2.2 THE IDENTIFICATION OF TRANSESCENTS

In the early 1960's, only junior high and junior-senior high schools existed. They operated in a similar fashion to high schools with departmental hallways, a subject-driven curriculum and inattention to student developmental needs. With new research available on this unique youngster, the early adolescent, it became apparent that a new grouping and educational approach for this student was needed (Sklarz, 1982, p.197). William Alexander and Donald Eichhorn soon suggested to the educational community that junior high schools should transform into middle schools. This schooling alternative was explained in depth by Donald Eichorn in 1966 in his book *The Middle School*. He made several contributions to the middle school

movement including creating the term “transescent” to specifically identify the 10 to 14-year-old student attending middle grades classes (Hornbeck & Arth, 1991). By focusing in on Eichhorn’s recommendations of constructing middle school programs to meet the unique social and academic needs of students, John Swain, the president of the National Middle School Association in 1981 formed a commission to define the middle school and set parameters for the organization and curriculum that would best meet the needs of the developing adolescent child. The national Middle School Association took this initiative one step further in 1982 by releasing the publication *This We Believe*, identifying ten essential elements of a middle school, which focused on the transescent student:

- Educators knowledgeable about and committed to transescents (considered the keystone element)
- A balanced curriculum based on transescent needs
- A range of organizational arrangements
- Varied instructional strategies
- Full Exploratory Program
- Comprehensive advising and guidance
- Continuous progress for students
- Evaluation procedures compatible with transescent needs
- Cooperative planning
- Positive school environment

(National Middle School Association, 1982, p.1)

Since then, *This We Believe* has been revised three times, 1995, 2003 and 2010 and has been the most popular and widely cited document about middle level education. Each rendition

expands upon the core values of middle level schools and the developmental needs of young adolescents, originally known as transescents.

2.2.1 Understanding Transescents

Middle level schools have flourished since the 1970's causing educators to become better educated about the age group of the students they are teaching. Sklarz (1982) states, "The major goal of the middle school is to meet the complex and ever-changing intellectual, social, physical, and emotional needs of the emergent adolescent" (p.197). Transescent development is centered on physical, cognitive and social-emotional growth which occurs in varying rates between genders and individuals. This creates an ongoing challenge for educators because the student population they teach is extremely unbalanced. Because of the mismatch that exists, needs are partially or not addressed at all. The priorities of young adolescents tend to be on their social and physical development, a fact many teachers unwisely ignore (Lounsbury, 2000, p.1).

Lounsbury's (2000) research further indicated the following:

Young adolescents are a wondrous group, eager, enthusiastic, curious, adventuresome, full of life, fresh, and refreshing. They are genuine and do not shine in borrowed plumes. Their honesty is often disarming. They have a sense of humor, albeit one that is sometimes a bit weird. We should celebrate this stage of endless discovery during which youth come of age. Their capacities for thinking and reflecting are unfolding. Their outward behavior may belie the seriousness of their inner thoughts, but those who work closely with these young people know of their concern for the less fortunate, the environment, and other national problems. They worry about nuclear war, HIV, family disintegration, and moral issues. Their penchant for service is expressed in such things as

can-a-thons, service learning projects, and campaigns to save the whales. They seek heroes and heroines, individuals of character and conscience, ones whose examples can be emulated. This is not the time for adults to abdicate their critically important guidance role, yet this is too often what happens as adults assume that the peer group takes over. (p.2)

Transescent students can be both a pleasure and challenge to educate. They are very eager to learn, even though it is difficult to hold their attention and they are energetic, but channeling their enthusiasm into real learning takes creativity. The changes transescents are experiencing can cause significant implications for learning. Understanding the extensiveness and variation of transescent developmental characteristics is the foundation of responsive teaching and engaged learning.

2.2.2 Transescents of Today

Currently, the term transescent youth is coined as young adolescents, which has also expanded itself into a group identified as Generation Z. As Geck (2007) describes:

“Today's Generation Z currently comprises 14-year-olds or those approaching their early teens; these youths were born into a totally different technological world than what their immediate predecessors were, Generation Y. In fact, the Generation Z birth years closely correspond to the conception and birth of the World Wide Web.” (p.19).

Individuals, who have been raised in the millennium, bring with them a new set of needs coupled with the developmental needs of their age group.

This distinctive group of millennials has a pervasive use of technology which leads them to live most of their life on-line and multi-task with several devices. When on-line, they share

both intimate and mundane details of their life, including specifics about their relationships and photos of themselves. They share opinions and knowledge on-line in short communication bursts and are not attracted to e-mail or blogging as they prefer texting and keeping statements brief. Their illimitable communication is dangerous because even though they have had early experiences with technology, they do not have a deep understanding of the inner workings of the Internet. This has prompted schools to creating a new safety plans centered on digital citizenship. “Many of these students have never engaged in formal exercises comparing advantages, disadvantages, strengths, and weaknesses of the Web with other informational tools such as books and print journals” (Geck, 2007, p.19).

Never before has the school librarian been seen in such a pivotal role to influence transescent youth and provide professional development to teachers. Their supportive efforts are able to help Generation Z students build their information literacy and work with teachers to integrate on-line tools for research, collaboration and source evaluation. Generation Z is described as a collaborative group whom enjoys being engaged and relies on a network of relationships to build knowledge. Lecture-based lessons are a thing of the past as teachers today are challenged to incorporate more metacognitive strategies to guide students toward learning and interact with peers. As an open-minded and tolerant group, they are very accepting of individual differences and diversity. They also have a deep trust and respect for their parents.

Generation Z is challenging schools with a new set of needs related to technology, digital literacy and collaboration. Addressing Generation Z needs along with their adolescent developmental needs will help minimize a generational gap between educators and students and increase the use of developmentally appropriate practices in schools.

2.2.3 Summary

The movement of a child from an elementary school to a middle level school is a major step stone in formal education and the process of becoming an adult. The unique time period, known as "transescence," is when children ages 10 to 14 make the transition from childhood to full adolescence (NMSA, 1982). While all grade transitions can be challenging, the move from elementary to the middle level is particularly difficult. Transescent adolescents encounter more of everything in the middle level environment: more space to navigate, more people with whom to interact, and more choices to make in terms of classes, friendships, and activities (Neuharth-Pritchett & Parker, 2009). Students are experiencing more developmental and environmental changes in this time period than they ever have before.

Even though the transescent youth of today are furnished with needs that expand beyond their personal development, it remains vital that meeting the physical, cognitive and emotional developmental needs of young adolescents remains a core value of middle level educators. No other age level is of more importance to the future of individuals, and literally, to that of society; because these are the years when youngsters crystallize their beliefs about themselves and firm up their self-concepts, their philosophies of life, and their values – the things that are the ultimate determinants of their behavior (Lounsbury, 2000). By having sensitivity and a solid understanding of the experiences transescents undergo during these formative years, educators are better-suited to support them as they undergo the transition to the middle level.

2.3 STUDENT DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS

As adolescents enter the middle level environment for the first time, they experience coinciding changes involving the school setting and their personal development. Their educational environment is significantly altered and developmentally, they are experiencing puberty; which consists of physical, cognitive and social emotional growth. These developmental needs of young adolescents can significantly impact a child's success during the transition into the middle level, causing stress and apprehension to not only the students, but parents and educators as well. In their book, *Promoting a Successful Transition to Middle School*, Akos, Queen, and Lineberry (2004) state, "The movement into adolescence has itself been labeled a turning point or transition, with potential for great promise as well as numerous problems" (p.17).

As students experience the dual changes of school environment and personal development, they become confused and tense. Because they are facing so much at one time, it is common to see increased student stress and less motivation and follow-through when faced with a challenge. They focus on friendships, appearance and socialization rather than academics, attendance and organization. Technology has also shifted students' focus on school. Students communicate and work with digital devices beyond the school day, which can sometimes act as a distraction or create unwelcomed stress. As adolescents move into a middle level school or high school, anxiety is complicated further by other normative changes such as puberty, social and emotional development, the growing importance of peer relationships, and the development of higher order cognitive skills. Students who experience the stresses of numerous changes often have lower grades and decreased academic motivation, and they eventually drop out of school. Schools can prepare students for the transitions by becoming aware of students' needs and by

taking a proactive role in addressing those needs. (Akos, 2002; Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Eccles & Midgley, 1989).

Young adolescent students experience multiple developmental changes while transitioning into a middle level school. During early adolescence, students experience significant physical, cognitive, social and emotional growth and development (Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, & Flanagan, 1993). According to the National Middle School Association, “Young people undergo more rapid and profound personal changes between the ages 10 and 15 than any other time in their lives” (p.5).

It is imperative to have a connection between students’ needs and their academic environment. Eccles’ stage-environment fit theory claims that the negative changes in self-perceptions, affect, and behavior can be explained by the lack of fit or “developmental mismatch” between adolescent needs and the opportunities afforded them by their academic environments (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles, 1993). Eccles suggests that when changes in individual needs align with changes in opportunities within the environment, healthy development will result. Those who do not experience the alignment are at a greater risk for educational and social difficulties.

Much research has documented that students’ positive self-perceptions related to learning and motivation often decline while psychological difficulties (e.g, depressive symptoms, school truancy) often increase during adolescence (Midgley, Middleton, Gheen, & Kumar, 2002). Bodies, peer relationships, interests and a new school environment are in a state of change. The combination of the personal and educational changes can become overwhelming for a young adolescent; therefore, schools and educators should have awareness and integrate opportunities to address them in daily practice. A solid start in a middle level school can positively impact

school performance for future years. The developmental needs of young adolescents interrelate, but by understanding each one comprehensively, schools and teachers can better accommodate the developmental needs of their learners while they transition into the middle level environment. This section will focus on three developmental needs that students encounter as they enter a middle level school. Consequently, three separate sections will follow: physical development, cognitive development and social-emotional development.

2.3.1 Physical Development

Significant physical change is beginning to take place with young adolescents as they enter a middle level school. The dramatic change in one's body is the result of puberty. Puberty is a period of rapid physical maturation involving hormonal and bodily changes, including sexual maturation (Brighton, 2007). With the exception of the first 18 months of life, students experience more changes between the ages of 10 and 14 than at any other time in their lives (Cromwell, 1998; NMSA, 2010). The focus of this section will concentrate on the physical development that occurs in males and females as they transition into the middle level school.

The puberty that both male and females experience throughout their time in the middle level can be difficult for students to handle and often affects schooling as a student's attention shifts from education to his or her body. Physical transformations occur as a result of hormonal shifts such as redistribution of body fat, significant increases in weight and height, sudden changes in the skeletal and muscular systems, and changes in voice, hair, and complexion (Kellough & Kellough, 2008; Knowles & Brown, 2000; NMSA, 2010). These changes prompt both genders to have a heightened awareness of self-image and crave acceptance amongst their

peer, causing them to focus more on their appearance and body image rather than their academics.

The hormonal changes taking place can be scary for young adolescents because their bodies are acting and looking different than ever before. It is also difficult because every individual experiences puberty at their own rate. In general, physical maturation begins considerably earlier for girls than boys (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Manning, 2002; Mertens, Anfara & Caskey, 2007; NMSA, 2010). In the hallways of a middle level school it is very common to see a tiny adolescent female in the same class as another adolescent female of the exact same age who has a womanly appearance. A similar difference is heard in young adolescent males as voices can vary from squeaky to deep. Early maturation tends to be a positive experience for boys as they participate in sports, seek social recognition, and move toward the male cultural ideal with increased muscle mass. Alternatively, it can be an emotional time for girls as they experience menstruation, gain body fat, and encounter heightened scrutiny from peers (Bacchini & Maliulo, 2003; Eccles, 1999).

According to Akos, Queen and Lineberry (2005), “No two students will experience the same degree of growth and development - a fact that creates an interesting challenge for school personnel” (pp.18-19). A positive or negative impact during transition is connected to the physical development a young adolescent is experiencing. Because physical development of adolescents occurs during the middle level years, it can positively or negatively impact the transition experience a student can have. A middle level school’s supportive environment provided by the staff and surroundings can promote better decision-making by students and withhold them from vulnerable behavior and self-image issues and depression. Physical development is associated with the transition to a middle level school because it plays a critical

role in how students are taught, how buildings are designed and how students interact with each other.

Young adolescents are good observers, keenly aware of the physical changes they notice in themselves and their peers. Often young adolescents will pose the question, usually to themselves, “Am I normal?” This is especially true if young teens see themselves on either end of the developmental spectrum. Adolescents that develop at a faster rate tend to hide their maturing bodies while those who develop at a slower rate are equally embarrassed and often doubt that they will ever “catch-up” (Brighton, 2007). Young adolescents shift a lot of time and energy from schooling to self-image as they start to become accustomed to their new bodies. These young students feel constant pressure to gain acceptance through their appearance, which often results in mood swings, bullying and frequent changes in opinions (Akos, Queen, & Lineberry, 2005; Brighton, 2007). Young adolescents are faced with a combination of pressures as they enter a middle level school and begin the maturation process. They seek acceptance and attraction which has the possibility of leading to extremes such as low self-esteem or even sexual harassment.

The physical changes taking place with young adolescents can also result in a loss of coordination. Because of a decrease in fine motor control, handwriting can suddenly become more difficult. A simple task that was easy for them to accomplish just a few months earlier may turn into a daunting chore. Many middle level students complain about having to take notes and complete lengthy handwriting assignments. Brighton (2007) states “The regression in fine motor skills also results in objects being accidentally dropped or stumbling for no apparent reason” (p.44). Because of the majority of skeletal and muscular development taking place during puberty is not consistent; many bones are not fully developed or protected by larger sheets of

muscles. Therefore, it is common to see multiple middle level students wearing casts, splints and crutches. It is also common for middle level students to not sit comfortably in desks or chairs, which can be frustrating to teachers because they are challenged to design lessons with movement and activity.

The physical development that young adolescents experience is an exciting yet confusing stage of life. Amongst all of the changes a middle level student experience, none is more obvious than the physical changes that occur during puberty. Young adolescents cope better with the changes their body is undergoing when they are aware of the basic developmental information (Brighton, 2007). Most middle level health curriculums include this topic. Knowing that the maturation process is a natural part of life that everyone experiences, can be reassuring and help young adolescents realize that their changes are normal. It is beneficial for young adolescents to be presented with factual information about the “awkward stage” that many must endure. It is also helpful to have positive role models such as parents and teachers to help students grow accustomed to their new size and shape and be reassured that their bodies are only improving with more adult-like precision, strength and stamina (Brighton, 2007).

2.3.2 Cognitive Development

Just as adolescents display a wide range of physical development characteristics, they are also experiencing profound cognitive development. This development is not as visible but is just as intense and can be showcased through a wide range of individual intellectual development (California State Department of Education, 1987; Kellough & Kellough, 2008; Manning, 2002; Scales, 2003; Stevenson, 2002; VanHoose, Strahan, & L’Esperance, 2001). This domain includes intellectual and language development, reasoning abilities, and memory capacities. The

middle years of childhood are characterized by a gradual increase in logical reasoning using concrete examples, increased awareness of memory and learning strategies, and the achievement and consolidation of important academic skills, such as reading, writing, and computing (Zembar & Blume, 2009). These changes cannot be measured by a scale or measuring tape, but are significant enough that they have influenced middle level schools to become more developmentally appropriate in the way they operate and educate on a daily basis. Cognitive development encompasses various areas of intellectual development which can all effect a child's transition to a middle level school. The focus of this section is on the brain development taking place with students as they make this transition.

For the first time in their lives, “middle schoolers” are transitioning from concrete to abstract thought processes. During these years, young adolescents develop their reasoning and problem-solving skills and understand subtle nuances and idiosyncrasies. They are inclined to consider ideological issues, formulate and defend a position, question adult authority and appreciate sophisticated levels of humor (Brighton, 2007; Stevenson, 2002). Because this leads to increased curiosity and metacognition, this can be a challenging time period not only for a child, but also for their parents and educators.

The brain growth taking place in a young adolescent significantly impacts short-term memory. This adolescent behavior affects the way teachers teach and the way middle level schedules and programs are designed. For example, cognitive brain development in adolescents causes strong engagement in specific interests for a short-lived amount of time, increased peer interactions and a preference for active learning. During early adolescence, youth are most interested in real-life experiences and authentic learning opportunities; they are often less interested in conventional academic subjects (Kellough & Kellough, 2008).

Cognitive development is one of many developmental changes that young adolescents experience that can create a variety of teaching implications. In an article published by the National Education Association, Peter Lorain, a retired middle school principal and former president of the National Middle School Association, uses his own experiences and combined research with the National Middle School Association to recommend the following when enhancing learning and responding to the cognitive developmental needs of students.

1. Present limited amounts of new information, to accommodate the short-term memory.
 2. Provide opportunities for students to process and reinforce the new information and to connect the new information with previous learning. (Encourage students to talk with their classmates about the new information; have them debate or write about it; create group discussions.)
 3. Provide lessons that are varied, with lots of involvement and hands-on activities. Brain stimulus and pathways are created and made stronger with less resistance if they are reinforced with a variety of stimuli. (Create projects, use art, music, and visual resources; bring guest visitors to the classroom.)
 4. Provide lessons and activities that require problem solving and critical thinking. Brain growth is enhanced and strengthened through practice and exercise.
- (Lorain, 2013, p. 2)

Today, the same instructional strategies are being reinforced through the Common Core standards with the goal that all classrooms have increased metacognition, where students openly share what they are thinking (Calkins, Ehrenworth & Lehman, 2012; Edwards, 2014). It is during adolescence that many students experience metacognition for the first time. The adolescent brain

is developing in areas of reasoning/problem solving, decision making/hypothetical situations, processing information/efficiency, expertise/use of experience, and moral reasoning/social cognition (Edwards, 2014, p.5). Therefore, traditional teaching practices are not the best approach for this age level and discussion plays a big role in the classroom. According to Schurr (2003), class discussions are a developmentally appropriate practice in middle level classrooms because:

1. They provide the teacher with feedback about student learning.
2. They lend themselves to higher order thinking skills.
3. They help students develop interests and values as well as change attitudes.
4. They allow students to become more active participants in their learning.
5. They enable students to hear and offer alternative points of view and to explore complex issues. (p.26)

Middle schoolers learn best through social interaction and active learning; teaching strategies that are structured to promote curiosity, share thinking and make real-life connections to foster metacognitive skills. Students not only connect to what they are learning but are able to explain what they are thinking as they develop skills in deductive reasoning, problem solving and generalizing (Edwards, 2014; Lorain, 2002). When students explain their thinking they articulate what they know and believe, expanding their knowledge and use of language. Student discussion also encourages students to listen to each other and reevaluate their position to refine their thinking.

Just as physical development in adolescents occurs at varied periods of time, cognitive development progresses at different rates as well. This poses an interesting challenge for educators who are attempting to reach each learner because students are at different degrees of

problem-solving ability. When teachers consider the diversity that exists in their classroom they present lessons using a wide variety of materials and approaches to address all students' cognitive abilities (Tomlinson, 2014). Some students may require a more structured setting while others seek more challenging activities. Young adolescents need teachers who understand and know how they think, plan authentic and meaningful educational activities, promote questioning and problem-solving and connect learning to the real-world (Kellough & Kellough, 2008; Scales, 2003; Stevenson, 2002). Hands-on experiences, inquiry, choice and peer interaction promote students to explore the world around them, connect to what they are learning and foster deeper intellectual development.

2.3.3 Social-Emotional Development

Of all the changes taking place during a young adolescents' transition to middle level school, their social-emotional development is the area in which they are most consumed. Young adolescents tend to approach school differently because of the social-emotional development they are experiencing. According to Brighton (2007), "Around age 10 or 11, children begin to view their friends and peers as the focal point of their lives, while parents, teachers, and other previously important adults seemingly fade into the background" (p.23). The time adolescents spend with their parents decreases and time with their peers increases because of their strong desire to belong to a group (Kellough & Kellough, 2003; Manning, 2002; NMSA, 2010; Scales, 2003). The social-emotional challenges young adolescents face can influence a roller-coaster of emotions, moods and behaviors. Therefore, social-emotional changes have had a transformational effect on middle level schools as far what services and programs they provide as well as how they are structured. Middle level students learn best in an environment where

their social and emotional needs are addressed (Brighton, 2007; Scales, 2003). This section will connect the social and emotional development of young adolescents as they move from an elementary to a middle level school.

The emotional development that young adolescents experience is focused on gaining independence and constructing personal identity. Young adolescents seek their own sense of individuality and uniqueness (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Knowles & Brown, 2000). A complex dynamic exists between the two. They are searching for an adult identity as well as adult acceptance, while striving to maintain peer approval (Kellough & Kellough, 2008; Scales, 2003). This explains why middle level students take significant risks related to what they are wearing, what they are saying and how they are acting.

Young adolescents have a tendency to become moody, restless, and may exhibit erratic and inconsistent behavior including anxiety, bravado, and fluctuations between superiority and inferiority (Kellough & Kellough, 2008; Scales, 2003; Wiles, Bondi, & Wiles, 2006). Feelings and moods can shift frequently causing unpredictable behavioral patterns. Transitioning middle level students can reach behavioral extremes of childish tendencies, adult mimicking or elevated senses of self as they navigate their emotional development.

The social development influences peer relationships and social acceptance. Young adolescents often feel conflicted between their peer groups and their family (Manning, 2002). Their strong desire to belong to a group creates a focus on friends and peers, which can diminish a connection to adult figures such as parents and teachers. Adolescents tend to seek advice from peers which has the potential to lead to negative behaviors. This often creates a situation where they are influenced to try or do new things to fit in with a specific group. This is commonly referred to as peer pressure. The term “peer pressure” has been coined to describe the

phenomenon of allowing real or perceived expectations of the peer group to dictate individual behavior. Brighton (2007) states, “While peer pressure is not unique to the middle level, it does tend to peak at about age fourteen” (p.24).

Social/emotional development combined with the transition to a middle level school is evident in the way a middle level school is arranged. The organizational structure of the middle school concept stems from adolescents’ desire to belong (Akos, 2004; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Schumacher, 1998; Wormeli, 2011). Placing students on an interdisciplinary team addresses multiple social-emotional needs (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; MacIver & Epstein, 1991). Having fierce loyalty to a group satisfies such personal needs as companionship, status, and recognition and promotes a positive self-esteem and identity (Brighton, 2007; Kellough & Kellough, 2008; Scales, 2003). Therefore, the team structure of the middle school concept fulfills a young adolescents’ top social concern, a sense of belonging. Middle level schools also have a strong emphasis on emotional needs so that all students are afforded multiple opportunities to figure out their interests and gain independence. This is commonly afforded through classes and extra-curricular offerings.

Young adolescents’ social and emotional development is categorized by strong needs that include a sense of belonging, a pursuit for independence and the craving of a mature identity. Because of this development, relationships with others, decision-making and individual self-esteem are affected. Student behavior is also very inconsistent. These changes and needs have influenced middle level schools to design and offer specific opportunities to build relationships with peers, promote an atmosphere that makes everyone feel included and support students independence and self-confidence.

2.3.4 Summary

The move from elementary to a middle level school poses a unique challenge. Due to the developmental changes taking place with students, the transition can seem difficult for students as they mature and navigate a new environment simultaneously. Akos, Queen and Lineberry (2005) state, “The transition from elementary to middle school represents a rite of passage for many youth” (p.17). Youth between the ages of 10 and 15 are characterized by their diversity as they move through the pubertal growth cycle at varying times and rates. Yet, as a group, they reflect important developmental characteristics that have major implications for parents, educators, and others who care for them and seek to promote their healthy growth and positive development (NMSA, 2010). Adolescent development is multi-faced. Advocates of the middle school concept believe and psychological literature demonstrates that it is critical for middle level schools to address each developmental area independently as well as their inter-connectedness to each other.

With a plethora of change taking place coincidentally, it is important that educators respond to the unique developmental needs of the students and implement the necessary strategies to help them navigate their new environment and life. Young adolescents need educators that are not only content experts but spend time daily helping their students develop identities and mature appropriately. It is a middle level educator’s duty to use the developmental changes that young adolescents experience to help students grow and mature academically and socially and reach the ultimate goals of middle level education (NMSA, 2010).

A transitional experience has the potential to produce positive or negative long term effects. By no means should it be a negative turning point in a student’s academic path. Adjustment to a new environment and personal changes can be a difficult experience and if not

given the necessary attention could produce long term implications. Middle level students require a strong support system that aids them in better understanding themselves, each other and their new school. It is imperative for school principals and personnel to obtain and withhold a strong understanding of the developmental processes associated with adolescence in order to effectively meet their students' needs. Students transitioning to a middle level school from an elementary school have the potential to build foundational skills that will assist them in achieving higher success with future schooling.

2.4 DEVELOPMENTAL APPROPRIATE TRANSITIONAL PRACTICES

When individuals travel to a new place, they carry with them physical items aligned to what they will need and varied emotions about where they are headed. Their luggage is filled with everything that they think will help them in the journey ahead which addresses three common themes; safety, information and connection. These three themes guide travelers on what to pack, what to expect and what to possibly fear. But everyone does not view what they will soon be facing in the same way. Some may be happy and excited while others may be nervous and scared.

This analogy explains why it is important for middle level schools to provide transition practices, programs and school-wide interventions for all stakeholders. Effective middle level transition programs establish a sense of belonging among the multiple constituencies involved, appropriately respond to the needs of the incoming students, and provide multiple opportunities for all constituencies to develop a meaningful role during the transition process as well as maintain that role throughout the school year (Deemer, McCotter, & Smith, 2009; Schumacher,

1998). Comprehensive approaches to help facilitate the transition process from elementary to a middle level school are necessary for students, teachers and parents. Currently, schools are devoting substantial time and effort to develop and implement a variety of transitional practices.

Acclimating students and their families as they move from an elementary school to a middle level school involves multiple interventions. A smooth transition between schools requires more than a student orientation, a family welcome barbeque, and a letter sent home (Andrews & Bishop, 2012). The practices that schools are creating and employing are focused on “connectedness” at all levels and with all stakeholders. Teachers and parents are a valued part of the transition and included in decision-making (Baker & Narula, 2012).

Even though they require significant planning, transition programs have the power to transform a school’s culture and increase academic success. A poor transition during middle level schooling has the potential to lead to other poor transitions (Eccles, 1993) and negative long term outcomes such as dropping out of school. Effective transition programs improve attendance, achievement, and retention (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). By implementing a well-designed transition program, the adjustment period takes less time and school success will be positively impacted (Allan & McKean, 1984).

Each school uses activities and strategies that align to their school population’s unique characteristics, features and needs; therefore, no standard model for transition is integrated consistently in every middle level school. The best transition programs are the ones tailor-made to suit each district (Dillon & Hertzog, 2008). Numerous transition activities are in existence and schools select or design what practices they feel are most important and beneficial to their population.

Transition practices are used prior, and during transition. They encompass a wide-variety of topics and needs. Effective and comprehensive transition programs help (1) build a sense of community; (2) respond to the needs and concerns of the students; and (3) provide appropriate, faceted approaches to facilitate the transition process (Schumacher, 1998). Weldy (1991) expands upon these three points by explaining the support that is required to accomplish such a program. He suggests that in order for a transition program to be successful, activities should involve all stakeholders, be planned in advance and in partnership with the sending school and should be evaluated and updated annually.

Transitional practices are necessary for students, teachers and parents. The planning and implementation of such a plan requires collaboration from multiple levels. A position paper was established by the National Middle School Association in conjunction with the National Association of Elementary School Principals to encourage principals, teachers, school counselors, parents, and students from both levels to work together in planning and implementing strategies that will directly address students' concerns and ease the transition to middle school (NMSA, 2002). Cross-level communication, planning and a relationship with the feeder elementary schools supports the development of a successful transition program. Designing, planning and implementing transitional practices is a team effort.

2.4.1 Student Practices

Because middle level transition takes place during a students' adolescent period of growth, general instruction and interventions support the whole child. Instruction allows adolescents to contribute, belong and develop their life skills in the classroom (Manning, 2000; NMSA, 2003). Since students are the individuals who are directly involved in the change taking place they play

an active role in their personal transition development. Therefore, by engaging in and assuming responsibility in multiple transition activities they are assisted with their move to the middle level school.

These opportunities enable them the chance to become familiar with the new school setting and the individuals, both adults and other students that they will be interacting with. It also helps them feel more comfortable with the new tasks they will be facing on a daily basis and address any concerns or fears they may have. Many students have varying degrees of opinion when asked about their upcoming move to a middle level school. In general, students are hesitant and uncertain about being intimidated, nervous or excited about the transition. When asked, sixth-grade students reported that getting to class on time, finding lockers, keeping up with materials, finding lunchrooms and bathrooms, getting on the right bus to go home, getting through crowded hallways and remembering which class to go to next were worries about middle level schooling (Schumacher, 1998; Weldy, 1991). Students have voiced concerns about navigating the larger building and getting lost, being late to class, being victimized by older students, meeting higher academic expectations, making new friends, and following new rules (Akos, 2002; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Mizelle, 1995; Weldy, 1991). The attractive features include meeting new peers and enjoying increased freedom, as well as having their own lockers, having different teachers for several subjects, choosing classes, moving to different rooms for various classes, eating in the cafeteria, participating in the sports program, and having the opportunity to make new friends (Akos, 2002; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Odegaard & Heath, 1992). The concerns and excitement are compounded by the fact that all students are adjusting to many changes not only in in their schooling but their personal development as well.

By creating transition activities centered on student uncertainties, questions can be answered and the new schools' expectations can be communicated, which generally causes student fears to diminish. Wormelli (2011) supports this by stating the analogy, "To promote empathy and respond constructively to new students, it's helpful to think of your middle schoolers as having arrived in a new country in which they don't speak the language and don't know the customs" (p.49). Transition activities should empathize with student concerns, de-intensify their fear and be constructed with a foundation of practical advice to address student concerns and misconceptions. Overall, transition activities for students should enhance their knowledge of themselves and provide a meaningful focus to start their middle level career.

Before school begins, middle level schools typically hold an orientation or "shadow day". A school visitation day with opportunities to meet teachers and other students and meetings for parents and students to gain information about the middle level helps ease families' fears and answers many questions they have (Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; NMSA, 2010; Weldy, 1991). This event is normally held prior to the school year beginning and helps students view and participate in a typical "middle" school day. Andrews and Bishop (2012) support this practice by stating, "While communication and engagement with families is, of course, a crucial component of a successful and comprehensive transition program, ensuring that students negotiate the new practices, policies, and school layouts is a complex endeavor" (p.8). This provides students opportunities to participate in the daily routines of a middle level school such as talking with other students and teachers, using a locker with a combination and attending elective classes such as band and chorus (Akos, Queen, & Lineberry, 2005). By offering this activity, students can immediately dispel some of the myths that they anticipate middle level school would be like and meet new individuals they will be working with.

Middle level schools further support transitioning students with the structure of the school. The organization of schools and their alignment to student developmental needs has a significant impact on the learning environment (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustine, & Constant 2004; NMSA, 2010). The “middle school concept” creates this supportive arrangement. The most predominant feature of the “the middle school concept” is teaming. Teams are composed of a group of teachers that teach all of the core academic subjects. The teachers that are a part of the team share planning time, the same area of a building and commonly instruct the same group of students, which can consist of about 100 to 125 learners (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2000, 2003; George & Alexander, 1993; Hough, Mertens, & Mulhull, 2003; Jackson & Davis, 2000). Since the middle level school is larger in size, it is divided into “houses” or “schools-within-schools” (Akos, Queen, & Lineberry, 2005; Hough, Mertens, & Mulhull, 2003; Jackson & Davis, 2000, NMSA, 2010). Proponents of this concept feel that it meets the needs of the students and is sensitive to the physical and psychological processes of 10 to 14 year old children (Jackson & Davis, 2000). The National Middle School Association (2010) firmly believes, “The team is the foundation for a strong learning community characterized by a sense of family” (p.31). Teaming allows students to share the same group of teachers for core classes and work with additional teachers when they leave the team for elective classes. The structure enables students to experience a mix of personalities and ultimately connect with adults. Students and teachers on a team have opportunities for positive relationship building with peers and teachers, feel safe, respected, and supported because teachers discuss strengths and weaknesses daily among team members, and are encouraged to take intellectual risks (Alvermann & Muth, 1992; NMSA, 2010). The team concept is a continuous support for transitioning students.

There are a vast amount of transition activities in existence because every middle level school creates its own program. A collaborative relationship between elementary schools and middle level schools establishes interventions and continuing activities to support students' transitional needs. Akos, Queen and Lineberry (2005) list several strategies in the book *Promoting a Successful Transition to Middle School* that Shumacher (1998) recommends. Summarized, they promote new students to connect with the school and current students through such mediums as a pen-pal program, field trips to middle level school events and a building scavenger hunt for students and their parents.

Well-constructed transition programs address academic, procedural and social concerns of students. Academically, students worry about increased academic expectations and look for ways to be successful. Procedurally, they also worry about negotiating the rules and environment at the new school. And socially, they worry about having friends and getting along with peers and teachers (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Diemert 1992; Odegard & Heath 1992; Schumacher, 1998). In order to verify that student transitional needs are being met and the transition activities in place are effective, it is important to obtain feedback. Student feedback provides a direct reflection of the strategies used with the individuals experiencing the transition.

2.4.2 Parent Practices

The transition activities that support students are not only essential in school, but at home as well. Therefore, families should be prepared and educated about the transition process in order to best support their children during this critical time of change. Families of today are structured in various manners and include inclusive approaches to raising children. The term “parents” in this

research represents any parent or guardian arrangement that would be directly involved with a child during their transition to a middle level school.

Parents can negatively affect transition. Often the worst offenders are parents who think they are preparing their children by telling them how hard the new school is going to be and how they better get it together. On the opposite end of the spectrum are parents who don't know how to let go. That's not to say that parents don't have a place and a role in their child's education as they get older. The involvement must be purposeful, whether it be helping their child organize their planner or helping the school personnel organize an event (Dillon, 2008). Parents are often found to be apprehensive and confused about the middle level experience. Out of care and concern for their child they often fear the larger school, increased expectations, student independence and adolescent changes. Their fear has the potential to transfer to their children and negatively influence their transition experience.

Current research makes it very clear that continued parental involvement is essential in the successful transition of students. Parent participation in the middle level generally results in parent participation during future years and throughout high school (Akos, Queen, & Lineberry, 2005; Mac Iver, 1990). Schools have the power to create a strong and purposeful partnership with parents. When schools involve parents in the transition process, family concerns are addressed, their questions are answered and they are provided with the support that will inherently help them help their child. During transition, middle level schools should be responsive to families, teaching them strategies that will help support and encourage their child's academic success while at the same time be transparent about the changes in curriculum, environment and expectations.

The Association for Middle Level Education, formerly known as the National Middle School Association, encourages parents of middle level students to be active during the transition period. Parent support at home should be a continuation of what the school encourages on a daily basis to address transitional concerns. Parents are encouraged to provide manageable tasks to their children to help them develop organizational skills and responsibility, help students learn about all features of their new school including rules, schedules, lockers and counseling, attend school functions and encourage their children to get involved and attend school activities and events and educate themselves about the needs and concerns of transitioning young adolescents (NMSA, 2002). Transitional activities are as important for parents as they are for students.

Parents need to be educated about their child's new school so they can be provided strategies on how they can best support their children. It is common for schools to provide an orientation night specifically for parents. The evening is normally held during the spring prior to the transition at a time that their child is beginning the scheduling process for the upcoming school year. At the orientation, parents are provided information about the new school and have an opportunity to meet administration and important personnel such as counselors and the school nurse. This kind of event is the first step in supporting families for the move to the middle level school.

The three most important concepts to focus on with parents during middle level transition are the changes, communication and connections. Parents should be made aware of the academic and social changes in the new school prior to the new school year beginning. This is made possible through parent orientation nights, mailings and school handbooks. Also, parent activities should continue throughout the school year including monthly meetings with school administration, parent education programs, open houses and parent volunteer groups.

Parents are a critical component to middle level transition. Families need to be informed about the challenges and demands of the middle level environment and be provided strategies that will help their children cope with the challenges of transition and support their social, emotional and academic success. By educating parents on the new setting and adolescent changes and involving them in the transition process, they can become a partner to support students and work in cooperation with the school.

2.4.3 School Personnel Practices

Educators are aware of the unique developmental needs of the age group they teach, but are often confused on how to best support students during the transition period. The transition journey for a young adolescent is challenging for the teacher, regardless of experience (Akos, Queen, & Lineberry, 2005). Middle level educators may have little or no control over the life changes that are experienced by their incoming students, but they do have control over the environment created within the school (Irvin, 1997). Providing professional development, committee participation and on-going collaboration surrounding the topic of transition systematically in place, supports middle level staff members, including teachers and counselors. Having staff that is well-educated on the concept of transition and the developmental needs of the age group transitioning can effectively support transitioning students. Akos, Queen and Lineberry (2005) encourage teachers to, “Be armed with skills that make the transition easier and provide a clear understanding of young adolescents’ cognitive, social and emotional development” (p.107). This critical information plays a role in their lesson design, communication with students and classroom management. It is also essential in appropriately supporting students as they transition into a new environment.

Understanding adolescent transition experiences and teacher and instructional factors that could potentially cause poor transitions to occur has led to several recommendations. Deemer, McCotter and Smith (2009) state that, “These recommendations offer important avenues for middle level teachers to proactively address the academic, self-perception, and motivational needs of young adolescents as they transition into middle school” (p.20). Avenues to meet their needs include teachers evaluating and enhancing their practice, making positive relationship-building with students a priority, designing instruction with young adolescent needs in mind and structuring a classroom that is focused on individual learning styles, collaboration and mastery.

The stated recommendations enhance the teaching practice on many levels. Teachers who incorporate transition related practices into their planning will in turn connect with more students and provide stronger instructional strategies to support young adolescents during the transition to the middle level. Teachers are a key stakeholder in the transition process. Teachers who are knowledgeable and confident not only about the content they are teaching, but the age level they teach, specifically adolescents, will positively affect the transition the students are experiencing. A teachers’ regular reflection on what they are teaching and how it is transferring to students can transform teaching and teacher confidence. It can also influence their professional development and growth. Middle level teachers by nature are collaborative due to the teaming that exists with scheduling, so many find themselves participating in peer observation to explore new practices and reading and discussing professional readings related to the middle level to broaden their instructional repertoire.

The importance of establishing positive, individualized relationships with students cannot be understated, as human relationships are vital to an “inviting, supportive, safe environment” (Jackson & Davis, 2000: Manning, 2000: NMSA, 2003). The relationships between teachers and

students are critical because they can play an influential role in their attitude, motivation, academic achievement and transition into a middle level school. Parker and Neuharth-Pritchett (2009) believe, “While middle school teachers typically teach many more students than their elementary counterparts, this is not an excuse for failing to get to know students on a personal level” (p.23). One of the most popular and beneficial transition practices used by teachers with students are “getting to know you” activities. Middle level teams usually plan and implement these “icebreaker” activities with students in order to provide an opportunity to meet other students and interact informally with teachers. The activities also set the tone for the learning environment and align with the teaming philosophy of the middle level school.

Both teachers and counselors play a critical role in a child’s transition to a middle level school. They are key communicators for students and families as well as facilitators of transitional practices. They learn and teach beyond their content area in order to provide an experience that will help students navigate through the change they are encountering. The National Middle School Association is devoted to providing educators with practical yet theoretical information, resources and strategies to enhance their teaching and work with middle level students. In a transition-related position paper with the National Association of Elementary School Principals, NMSA suggests that teachers and counselors should provide programs, activities and curriculum, counseling and developmentally appropriate instructional practices to enable students to understand and cope with the transition taking place, provide ongoing support and enable each child to experience academic success (NMSA, 2002).

Since there is so much involvement on behalf of the staff involved with transitioning students to the middle level, commitment is necessary. This requires multiple stakeholders including teachers, counselors and administrators to continually focus on the topic of transition.

Transition strategies should be shared and reflected upon on an annual basis by all participating staff in order to best meet the needs of the transitioning students.

Having a commitment to a transition program also should include an evaluative component. This provides those involved with the transition program to assess the goals and strategies as well as focus on continuous improvement. A strategy to assess transition programs involves having a transition committee. Members of the committee should include staff from both the feeder school(s) and the middle level school. By having representatives from both school environments, student concerns can be better addressed and planned. When developing its plan, the transition planning team should consider three dimensions of transition programs; student needs and concerns, timing of activities, and audience (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). The collaboration also creates the opportunity to have a focused mission. Everyone involved must be committed to follow through on communications and expectations by sharing a common vision to serve students in a positive school environment with high expectation, emotional and academic support all while encouraging family partnerships (Akos, Queen, & Lineberry, 2005; Weldy, 1991). The principles of the transition committee provide a rationale for effective and necessary transition practices.

Another layer of the transition committee also includes the involvement of the school principal and the training provided to staff. Staff development for teachers, administrators, and counselors should take place to discuss the goals, potential problems, activities, procedures, and significance of the program (Perkins & Gefler, 1995; Weldy, 1991). In doing so, focused professional development can be designed to support common understanding and program implementation.

2.4.4 Summary

Transition is not just an event that precedes the middle level school experience, but rather a process that continues across a number of years. Supporting students prior to and during this transition period can help to deter negative long term implications (Akos, Queen, & Lineberry, 2005; Campbell & Jacobson, 2008; Hertzog, 1998; Schumacher, 1998). The transition a child experiences could positively or negatively influence their performance in school; therefore, school principals and personnel are researching and designing additional methods and strategies to appropriately assist students as they move from the elementary setting to the middle level. Recent work in middle level education has provided direction for best instructional and organizational practices to meet the needs of early adolescents. Comprehensive transition programs that include numerous activities geared toward the needs and concerns of students, parents, and teachers can be effective in helping students transition to a new school with less anxiety and more academic success (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Jackson & Davis, 2000).

Students, teachers and parents face many challenges during the move to a middle level school. According to Andrews and Bishop (2012), “Students need to acclimate to new policies, practices, and buildings; teachers require accurate data about their new students’ capacities; and families must navigate relationships with new personnel” (p.8). In planning and implementing programs to address the needs and concerns of students moving from elementary to middle level environments, it is clear that collaboration among all adults who share responsibility and concern for our children's welfare is ultimately the most effective transition strategy we can employ (NMSA, 2002). Current transition practices support all stakeholders involved in the transition and are logically planned and implemented based on those individuals distinctive needs.

By reflecting on professional experience and synthesizing literature related to the topic of middle level transition, the next rational step was to examine how school principals are currently addressing transition. This study sought to go beyond what we already know in order to examine transitional practices and concerns as they relate to today's transescent Generation Z students. Therefore, this study contributed new knowledge to school principals and personnel in regards to middle level transition.

There are very few resources that outline a complete transitional program. There is also a mismatch between what educators know about the needs of the students they teach and what they do to support them. As Wormeli (2011) asked, "If high school success, navigating the larger world, and discovering the direction we want our lives to take all have roots in young adolescence, why would anyone leave the transition into this impressionable phase to chance?" (p.48). A transition program that caters to student developmental needs through a series of practices, eliminates concerns and assists in building a stronger school community. These reasons indicate the need for research on transitional practices of middle level schools. By investigating what school principals have in place for students, parents and school personnel prior and during the transitional period to the middle level, the field of education and policy makers could be better informed and potentially influenced to support today's youth.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the methodology used to accomplish the purpose of the research. This descriptive study used a survey tool to investigate the transition practices that are currently used with students, parents and school personnel in public middle level schools in Pennsylvania. Participants who engaged with the quantitative approach of the study were principals of middle level schools in the state of Pennsylvania.

An extensive review of literature revealed that a wide variety of transitional practices are in existence and middle level schools use these practices to varying degrees. Because schools and districts personally select what practices to use, there is an unbalanced approach in meeting the developmental needs that accompany transescents as they move from elementary to a middle level setting.

Middle level principals and school personnel are aware that students are experiencing multiple changes as they move to a middle level school, but lack knowledge about how to support their transitional needs. For example, in a university-school district investigation about middle level transition, Deemer, McCotter and Smith (2003) revealed that students felt a disconnection from school and were uncomfortable talking to teachers and joining activities during the middle level and parents were less involved in the middle grades. Although the findings mirrored many of those discovered by other researchers (e.g., Eccles & Midgley, 1989), this particular study added additional validity to previous work. The study highlighted the

importance of schools responding to adolescent struggles during the transition to a middle level school and most importantly surfaced awareness that transitional support is necessary.

The way in which a middle level school structures their transition program can ultimately affect the culture of the building and the academic success that students' experience. It can also help students cope with the developmental changes they are undergoing with greater ease and acceptance. This is why transitional practices should be a priority for middle level schools. With proper attention and planning, schools can support students, parents and school personnel during the transitional period.

My purpose for this study was to closely examine and analyze what transitional practices middle level schools in Pennsylvania use to support students, parents and school personnel during the transition period into a middle level school and understand what practices principals rate as most successful. I also compared transitional practices between schools that have and have not been nationally recognized as a *School to Watch* as well as how the practices varied within the different grade level configurations of middle level schools. I also identified how transitional practices connect to the developmental needs of young adolescents in order to determine if the practices that are used by schools are meeting transescent developmental needs. This information led me to create a listing of recommended best practices to best support students and their families as they transition to the middle level setting.

Methodological descriptions include: 1) research design, 2) research questions, 3) instrument development and data collection, 4) sample population, 5) pilot study procedures, 6) data analysis procedures, 7) and the delimitations/limitations.

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

This study utilized a descriptive design using survey instrumentation within a quantitative methodology. This design permitted the exploration of various middle level transition program features and current practices. The design also allowed for contrast and comparison of data between middle level schools that were and were not nationally recognized as a *School to Watch* and middle level schools of varied grade level configurations. I compared transition program practices among multiple middle level schools in Pennsylvania to identify the extent specific transitional practices are used with students, parents and school personnel before and during the first year at a middle level school and understand which practices principals view as most successful. I also made comparisons to determine how those practices connect to the physical, cognitive and social/emotional developmental growth taking place in young adolescents, how their use varies amongst different grade level configurations of middle level buildings and if the practices are more existent in schools with *School to Watch* recognition.

3.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What transition activities do Pennsylvania middle level schools implement for students, parents and school personnel before and during the first year?
2. Which middle level transitional practices do principals rate as most successful?

3. To what extent are middle level transition program activities aligned to the developmental needs (physical, cognitive, social/emotional) of young adolescents?
4. How do transitional practices compare between middle level schools that have and have not been identified nationally as a *School to Watch*?
5. How do transitional practices utilized with students, parents and school personnel vary by the grade level configuration of middle level schools?

3.3 INSTRUMENT DEVELOPMENT AND DATA COLLECTION

An online survey was used to collect quantitative data for this research study. Survey questions were directly linked to each of the five research questions. Patten (2014), verified the importance of this by stating, “Each item in a questionnaire should relate to a specific objective of your research” (p.9). Additionally, a survey is able to capture several domains of inquiry in one instrument, creating the opportunity to gather a substantial amount of data from many individuals in a short period of time. Fowler (2014) further indicates, “Surveys are efficient in that many variables can be measured without substantially increasing the time or cost” (p. 160). Based upon the literature reading, which calls for an investigation of this topic and my interest to seek a broad perspective on transitional practices, a survey served as the optimal tool to gain data from a large group.

Facilitating a survey most effectively pushes forward the research agenda into determining successful middle level transition practices. Therefore, a survey was the best fit for

the research questions. Also, given the objective of the research, the time frame, available resources and the varied participant locations, the survey was the most efficient tool to utilize in order to gain deeper insight and perspective of what transitional practices are taking place in middle level schools across the state of Pennsylvania.

3.3.1 Survey and Analysis Software

I used Qualtrics software to structurally design the survey and continued to use it to collect data and house the survey results. Qualtrics is an on-line survey software that allows researchers to creatively conduct academic research through a secure medium. It had the capacity to distribute surveys quickly via e-mail, manage data entry, track respondents and provide advanced security and confidentiality of results.

The survey for this research included scaled, open-ended and Likert-scale questions. Incorporating all of these question styles was important to the research because it provided an opportunity for participants to select answer options that represent their educational institution and add personal information relating to their knowledge and experience.

A spreadsheet was populated in the Qualtrics' system with each participant's responses as they completed the survey. The spreadsheet is an essential component to the data analysis process as it assisted in identifying frequencies, making comparisons and examining new information. The filtered data remained anonymous and was confidentially secured in the Qualtrics online system. Coding respondent identity was only used to limit the follow-up correspondence in the form of reminder e-mails to those who did not participate in the survey. Name and e-mail addresses were not connected to the survey response. Separate databases were

created to house this information and only I could access the secure location. Participants were made aware that data were being held confidentially and will be destroyed at a later date.

Stata version 13 software was used to analyze the survey data. This software facilitates a variety of descriptive and inferential statistical measures. Qualtrics data can readily be imported into Stata for analysis.

3.3.2 Survey Items

Several concepts were measured in the survey through a series of items. The items, which mainly represented transitional practices, were gathered through an extensive review of literature. A singular list of transitional practices does not exist, thus, researchers, authors and organizations publish what they have found to be successful. These sources provide multiple examples of transitional practices for students, parents and school personnel. When reviewing the many examples of practices, I tallied the number of occasions each practice was referenced. In doing so, I created a master list of transitional practices. These practices, because they were frequently named and were not unique to a specific school or district formed the list of practices that would be used in the survey. The following matrix organizes the sources and the transitional practices they referenced by stakeholder groups.

Table 1. Research-based transitional practices by stakeholder

<u>Source(s):</u>	Students	Parents	School Personnel
Akos, Queen & Lineberry (2005)	X	X	X
Andrews & Bishop (2012)	X	X	X

Table 1 (continued)

Cauley & Jovanovich (2006)	X	X	X
Jackson & Davis (2000)		X	
Niesen & Wise (2004)	X	X	X
Odegaard & Heath (1992)	X		X
Parker & Neuharth- Pritchett (2009)	X		X
Schoffner & Williamson (2000)	X		
Schumacher (1998)	X		X
Siehl & Gentry (1990)	X		
Wormeli (2011)	X	X	X

Forty-two total survey items were constructed to support the identified themes that emerged from the research questions. Using literature, twenty-eight transitional practice items were aligned to the identified stakeholders of students, parents and school personnel, as well as the two time periods of before and during transition. Additionally, three categories of developmental needs were identified - physical, cognitive, and social-emotional. Each transitional practice item for students was drawn from relevant literature and aligned to the identified adolescent developmental need categories. Literature confirmed the majority of developmental labels for student practices though, for several practices an overlapping can exist, meaning one practice can align to more than one developmental need. To resolve this situation, I labeled practices based on their description and used her own middle level experience to support the identification. Even though most practices were labeled with a developmental need via the literature or my perception, participants may have perceived them differently as they engaged

with the survey. Therefore, respondent interpretation could have skewed results because participants did not view the developmental need labels the same as I did and interpreted them as aligning to a different or several developmental needs.

In order to increase content validity of the survey, the items were reviewed, sorted and condensed to effectively align to the research questions (See Appendix A). The streamlining and decrease in the amount of survey questions signified the relation and importance of each item to each research question. The item-writing process reflects best practices for increasing content validity (face validity) in the field of scale development (DeVilles, 2003):

- Create a large item pool that reflects the content area, and then reduce it to the ‘best’ (most concise and salient) items. The final item set should be substantially smaller than the original item pool, while maintaining a broad perspective on the construct.
- Items should be as brief and concise as possible without sacrificing the underlying meaning.
- Unnecessary jargon should be replaced with common language.
- Items should be positively worded to avoid confusion and double-negative response options.
- Items should vary in ‘difficulty’ to provide high, mid-range, and low scores for a construct.
- Item framing (context) and response options should be consistent among items.
- Response options should be in a logical order and lend themselves to meaningful differentiation between response levels. (p.37)

The process prompted the selection and writing of survey items as well as framing the survey construction with quantitative and qualitative items.

The survey was preceded with a script, outlining the purpose of the research, anticipated participant completion time, foreseeable risks, confidentiality and lists my contact information. All participants were required to confirm their participation after reading the script.

The first section of the survey included scaled questions in the form of transitional practices that represent different stakeholders (students, parents, school personnel) involved prior to and during the transition period. The major benefit to using the scaled questions was because they correspond well with the participants in the study. Participants completing the survey have moderate knowledge and experience about the survey topic, therefore the scaled approach permitted them a forum to freely and fully respond in regard to their own frame of reference. By incorporating these questions I was able to better determine the value of the research I am conducting. The scaled questions also provided a more precise measure of information in comparison to a yes/no or true/false format. Each survey participant was instructed to select a level of implementation in regards to each transitional practice. The level of transitional practice implementation was measured using a 5-point Likert-type frequency scale. A frequency response scale (1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, 5 = always) was chosen for this section of the survey instead of an intense balanced scale (e.g., not implemented ... very implemented) to avoid adverse context of the items. Within this section, items were ordered from low to high completion difficulty. By using this approach, there was greater precision and presentation for each item, which may have contributed to increased survey completion. The 28 transitional practice items were presented in a random order to control survey priming effects for respondents (Lavrakas, 2008). The frequency scaled questions helped to clearly showcase what

practices schools currently use or do not use during the transitional period, which is the heart of the research.

A survey question requiring participants to identify which practices they identified as “often” or “always” implemented followed the Likert-scale section. All practices that were identified as often or always implemented were automatically listed for participants to select the five practices they feel are most successful in their school. This added an additional layer of understanding about the use and successfulness of the transitional practices as specifically identified in research question two.

In another section of the survey, participants had the opportunity to include any other practice that they may currently utilize in their school with students, parents or school personnel by completing three open-ended response questions. These questions were important because they provide participants the opportunity to provide their own insight and enabled me to qualify survey data. The placement of the three open-ended questions was critical in the survey development. In order to avoid the open-ended questions being ignored or left incomplete, they were strategically placed at the end of the survey. Even though they were optional, they promoted participants to stay in the same frame of reference and think deeply about the practices they uniquely use. The open-ended questions were primarily included so that respondents can provide further detail about their knowledge or use of transitional practices. Data gathered from these questions provided deeper perspective on what transitional practices are being used by schools and how they relate to the developmental needs of young adolescents.

Participants were also asked to rate how important they think middle level transitional practices are. The question asked participants to respond on the intensity scale (not at all, a little bit, somewhat, quite a bit, very much) to explain their opinion. Also, participants were asked to

identify what barriers exist in implementing additional and new transitional practices (time, funding, lack of staff, lack of knowledge, other). These questions generated new ideas about how transition is viewed and what barriers exist when implementing transitional practices, beyond what the research has identified.

Participants were asked to complete four demographic information-based multiple choice questions (grade levels included in their building, number of students in the building, school demographic designation and *School to Watch* designation) on the survey. The demographic questions helped describe the sample and organize responses for comparison and correlational purposes. Potential comparisons and correlations that purposefully existed included school grade level configuration and building designation as a *School to Watch*, which support research questions four and five.

3.4 SAMPLE POPULATION

Public middle level principals from the state of Pennsylvania were selected as participants in this study. To compile a list of public middle level schools across Pennsylvania, I relied upon several sources. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) website (<http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/>) which is linked to the Common Core of Data (CCD) allowed me to access a Public Schools locator to retrieve information and a listing of public schools from the CCD's databases. The Common Core of Data is a program of the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics that annually collects fiscal and non-fiscal data about all public schools, public school districts and state education agencies

in the United States. CCD data that was gathered was representative of the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 school years.

Three searches took place within the database to filter public middle level schools that included at least one of the “middle level” grades; sixth grade, seventh grade and/or eighth grade. Three spreadsheets were downloaded and combined into a single Excel spreadsheet that listed all qualifying schools. Duplicate names were then eliminated from the spreadsheet along with cyber schools, charter schools, K-8 schools and K-12 schools. These school types and configurations were eliminated because they are not a public school setting and they do not have a middle level transition occur. All schools listed as elementary status or having a grade level configuration that included middle grades was individually researched via their school website to determine if they qualified as part of the sample. Also, the Pennsylvania State Director, Bruce Vosburgh, was contacted in order to obtain a listing of Pennsylvania middle level schools that were designated or re-designated nationally as a *School to Watch*. These schools were highlighted on a spreadsheet that organizes the sample population information.

The spreadsheet provided a clear listing of the 639 public schools that contain middle level grades in Pennsylvania and identifies schools with *School to Watch* designation or re-designation. Consequently, the spreadsheet helped organize the total number of middle level schools that were eligible to participate in the study. A larger than needed sample size exists because of the vast amount of schools containing middle level grades in the state of Pennsylvania, therefore, a randomized selection process was used to select specific schools for participation in the study. In order to assure that a distribution of middle level schools from across Pennsylvania participated in the study, schools were grouped by county. Schools from each of the 67 counties in Pennsylvania were chosen as part of the sample. Using the random

selection process, every third school on the spreadsheet was selected as a participant. After realizing the sample was still not large enough, two additional schools were added from each county. A total of 350 principals of schools that contain any middle level grade (sixth, seventh, and/or eighth) were contacted via e-mail and invited to participate in the study. All schools listed that have been nationally recognized as a *School to Watch* were automatically included in the sample. There are 29 *School to Watch* designated and re-designated schools in the state of Pennsylvania as of 2014. I eliminated my home school from the study, therefore, 28 *School to Watch* schools were included in the sample.

To gain school contact information, I accessed each participating schools' webpage to obtain the principal's name and e-mail address. All selected schools' principals were contacted by e-mail via Qualtrics and invited to participate in the survey. The e-mail they received contained a link to the survey. Every participant was given a two-week window to complete the survey. Following the first week of survey availability, a follow-up e-mail was sent to only those who did not respond to remind them of the study. A total of three reminder e-mails were sent out during the two-week survey period. The enlistment and follow-up email letters are formally documented in Appendix B, Appendix C and Appendix D.

To avoid respondent burden, all potential participants were provided details about the survey, including the time required to complete the survey when they were invited to participate. The survey completion time was estimated at 10-15 minutes. Knowing that respondent burden exists, and there will not be a 100% response rate to the survey from the entire sample population, a sample of the whole was used for the study.

3.4.1 Sample Characterization

The sample represents only middle level principals in Pennsylvania. Beyond those two descriptions, the sample was characterized through a set of four additional items: 1) Grade levels included in the school, 2) Number of students in the school, 3) School demographic designation and 4) *School to Watch* designation status. The diversity of the sample was described by these criteria to identify participants and not impede responses. Frequencies of the responses to each of these items were reported in the form of percentages to illustrate these data. Grade level configuration and *School to Watch* designation status was used for comparative purposes as reflected in research questions four and five.

Of the 350 middle level principals contacted, 96 responded to the survey. Of the 96 respondents, 87 completed the survey in its entirety. Of the 96 participants, approximately 48% ($N = 46$) responded within one full day of receiving the e-mail inviting them to participate in the survey. An additional 20% ($N = 19$) responded within the following three days, and after sending three reminder e-mails to those who had not participated, the responses averaged about two per day for the remainder of the designated survey access time, excluding the Thanksgiving holiday.

Of the 96 participants, 87 participated in all four of the demographic and geographic questions included in the survey. Of the 87 participants, 6 reported that their school had a fourth grade, 19 had fifth grade, 61 had sixth grade, 86 had seventh grade, 84 had eighth grade, 17 had ninth grade, 16 had tenth grade, 16 had eleventh grade and 16 had twelfth grade ($Min = 1$, $Max = 9$, $N = 87$). For the amount of students that attend the participating schools, 2 reported their school contained 200 or fewer students, 20 reported that their school contained 201-400 students, 26 reported that their school contained 401-600 students, 20 reported that their school contained 601-800 students, 10 reported that their school contained 801-1000 students, 7 reported that their

school contained 1001-1200 students and 2 reported that their school contained 1201-1400 students ($Min = 1$, $Max = 7$, $SD = 1.36$, $N = 87$). For demographic designation, 44 participants served in a suburban school, 39 served in a rural school and 4 served in an urban school setting ($Min = 1$, $Max = 3$, $SD = 0.58$, $N = 87$ reported). Twelve participants reported that their school had been designated or re-designated as a *School to Watch*, 72 reported that their school was not designated or re-designated as a *School to Watch*, and 3 reported that they did not know if their school was designated or re-designated as a *School to Watch* ($Min = 1$, $Max = 3$, $SD = 0.40$, $N = 87$).

It is important to note that data gathered from this study are only from middle level schools that participated in the survey. Therefore, these data are not representative of the entire state of Pennsylvania. Because of this, responses can be slightly skewed because they were only received from those who were willing to participate in the survey. There is no possible way to determine why some middle level principals chose to participate and others did not. This can be interpreted in several ways and assumptions can be made. For example, those who did not participate may not have interest in the topic of transition, they may not feel confident with the transitional practices they use or they may not use transitional practices at all. If any of those are factual, results gathered from the study would represent schools that do emphasize the use of transitional practices and are possibly looking to improve their current program.

Because of the demographic questions included in the survey, the sample was able to be characterized. Upon further examination of who participated in the study, some respondent bias did surface. Of the 87 participants that responded to the geographic designation question, there were 39 school principals that identified their school as rural and forty-four who identified themselves as suburban. Only four participants identified themselves as urban. Because there

was only 5% urban school participants, compared to 45% rural and 51% suburban, the sample does not equally represent these three geographic categories in Pennsylvania. It is also important to recognize that 12 out of 28 *School to Watch* schools participated in the study. This is a limitation that resulted in some type of bias because there was a 43% response rate with *Schools to Watch* schools and a 27% response rate for schools not designated as a *School to Watch*. This may have been prompted by the e-mail that *School to Watch* principals received because the wording recognized them for their achievement and the communication was explicitly sent from a fellow *School to Watch* administrator. Overall, an adequate number of middle level principals from the state of Pennsylvania participated in the study. Therefore, reasonable comparisons were able to be made using the survey responses.

3.5 PILOT STUDY

A survey about transitioning into a middle level school was designed using Google Forms and tested through a pilot study during the fall semester of 2013. After the research objectives were developed and the comprehensive proposal was approved, a number of steps were accomplished to complete the pilot study.

The survey was designed by gathering a variety of transition practices from a review of literature and selecting a Likert-scale design that would enable me to understand what transitional practices are occurring currently in middle level schools. The literature review provided me several examples of transition practices used with students, parents and school personnel. I examined a series of Likert-scale examples in books and on the internet and settled on a 4-point scale to categorize each transitional practice as implemented or not implemented,

implemented but not to full capacity or not implemented and desired. It was important to partner the practices with a scale that enabled participants to rank their implementation. I decided to include a few open-ended questions in the survey to give participants the opportunity to list additional transitional practices they use in their school and describe how they know the practices are making an impact. I also wanted to inquire how transition was viewed by principals, such as, if they faced any barriers implementing transitional practices, if they feel the practices they are using are successful and how important they feel transitional practices are. Questions related to these inquiries were listed in a multiple-choice format. A draft was prepared of the survey items using this design.

The main goal of the pilot study was to refine the specific survey items for clarity and use. The survey was administered by e-mail to middle level principals and assistant principals in western Pennsylvania whose buildings have both been identified and not identified as a *School to Watch*. Six administrators I personally knew in the local area were asked to be participants as a means to obtain higher participation with the survey and have open communication to gain honest opinions and reaction to the survey format.

To fully inform participants about the research project and assist them in making an informed decision to participate or not, an informational script was included at the beginning of the survey. Participants were required to read and confirm participation prior to starting the survey.

Seven out of ten participants completed the survey. All participant data were gathered on a spreadsheet which was housed by Google Docs. Feedback about the survey structure and how questions were interpreted was documented through phone conversations and e-mail correspondence with two of the participants. I specifically chose to have a conversation with

each of the chosen individuals because one is an administrator from a *School to Watch* and the other is not. Both participants' schedules were also more flexible because they were both assistant principals. General questions were asked during a 10-15 minute conversation and notes were documented electronically.

General questions that were asked included:

1. Was the survey easy to access and did it function properly?
2. Did the survey take you longer to complete than the time I stated?
3. Was anything confusing to you?
4. Was there anything missing from each scaled category?
5. How did you interpret each open ended question?
6. Was anything redundant?
7. What would you like to see changed on this survey?
8. How does this survey help you?

Significant information was gathered from the verbal feedback I received. I was immediately pleased to find that all participants viewed transition practices as very important, as verified by the last question on the survey. Though most of the feedback was positive, some of it required me to make some serious revisions. From the survey data and verbal feedback, I learned that some of my questions were too vague. For example, when I asked for participants to list evidence that transitional practices were working or that there was a need for them, many responses lacked detail and therefore responses were very general. Through conversation I found out that participants were confused about what I specifically asking them to state and that the term evidence was too broad. I ended up completely rewording and restructuring every question that required evidence to be stated. I also realized that I needed specific demographic

information about the school that was completing the survey so that comparisons and correlations could be made to fulfill research question three and four. This led me to adding a new section into the survey with a series of multiple choice questions to designate the participating school. Demographics included grade level configuration and *School to Watch* designation. I also realized that I would like to know how survey participants became knowledgeable about transitional practices; therefore I am considering adding an additional multiple-choice question to inquire where an understanding stemmed from.

The pilot study was a very powerful learning experience which provided suggestions to improve the survey instrumentation and implementation. Not only did it help me better understand how to develop, implement and gather data using a survey, but it also aided me in finding out what I am truly pursuing from my research. I realized that I am seeking not only descriptive but inferential statistics as well. I proceeded to convert my survey to the Qualtrics program and reworded, excluded and added specific sections and questions in the survey to prepare for IRB approval. Once the survey was converted to Qualtrics and completely revised, it was submitted for IRB approval. The study and survey was approved by the Institutional Review Board on March 31, 2014. Additional revisions were submitted and approved by the IRB during the fall semester of 2014. The pilot study experience showed that the topic of my research is important and has great relevance for any educator or leader working with young adolescents.

3.6 DATA ANALYSIS

By gathering and analyzing research data I determined the transitional practices currently used by middle level schools in Pennsylvania and identify any trends or gaps that may exist. The

survey designed for the study was intended to gather quantitative data that represents the transitional practices middle level schools are using with incoming students, parents and school personnel in the state of Pennsylvania. Qualitative data were also obtained from three open-ended questions in the survey. This supported the exploratory research questions and my desire to describe data pertaining to several aspects of middle level transition.

Data from the survey were collected electronically using Qualtrics software. Qualtrics software supports the development, data gathering, and initial analysis of online survey data and is required for all online surveys developed through the University of Pittsburgh. To examine the distribution of data and formulate comparisons, several statistical measures were employed and analyzed using Stata-13 software. Analysis using a combination of categorical and continuous variables were used to determine frequency, frequency percent, median, mean and standard deviation. Also, Mann-Whitney *U* statistics were used to complete ranked tests of comparison. Qualitative data analysis was completed using “constant comparative coding” for the open-ended questions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The results from the data analysis process were used to make appropriate recommendations for middle level transition program practices. Data describing and or characterizing the sample created a reference point for future researchers who may also use the survey instrument to compare results among other samples (e.g., other U.S. states) to gain stronger understandings of middle level transitional practices. Additional future data analysis and research could include answering additional questions that emerge such as linking these data to the socio-economic status of a district.

Several participating principals have expressed interest in reading about the study findings related to implementing transitional practices with incoming middle level students,

parents and school personnel. Thus, the findings from the study were made available to participants who requested them. The following sections describe in detail how the data analysis was completed for this research in regards to the survey format and connection to each of the research questions.

3.6.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

Data collected from survey items were statistically analyzed to answer each of the research questions. The survey prompted analysis of 1) the demographic items that characterize the sample (e.g., geographic designation, barriers to implementing transitional practices), 2) the 28 transitional practices, 2) the composite variables from the transitional practices, and, 3) the transitional practice ranking.

Additional questions that were included in the survey were of interest to me both personally and professionally and describe the sample in relation to the population. While all survey items may or may not figure directly into the specific analysis, they were still used to influence the implications. For example, the two survey items about the importance of barriers to transition practices allow for more nuanced and holistic understanding of transition practices.

3.6.1.1 Demographic Data

There were four questions in the survey that provided demographic data. Frequency and frequency percent were used to describe the demographic data (i.e., grades included in the building, geographic designation, number of students that attend the school and, *School to Watch* designation status) in a categorical context. The demographic information described the sample and supported research questions four and five for comparative and correlational purposes.

3.6.1.2 Transitional Practices

Twenty-eight transitional practice items were listed on the survey. The listing of transitional practices and the response options, which provided a numerical value (Never = 1, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, Always = 5) determined to what degree particular transitional practices were used or not in middle level schools in Pennsylvania. Each survey item required participants to respond to what degree they used the transitional practice listed. This determined the level of implementation of the listed transitional practices that existed among the sample.

To examine each transitional practices item, frequency tables were used. Data from individual items were described in terms of frequency, median, and mode and analyzed with non-parametric statistics. These types of items, using a Likert-type scale, were not appropriate for parametric analyses or linear measures of central tendency (e.g., mean, standard deviation) because the response levels were not equally spaced – they provided data that was considered categorical and not interval. For example, the difference between the first two categories (1 = “Never” and 2 = “Rarely”) was not the same as the next two intervals (2 = “Rarely” and 3 = “Sometimes”). The responses were in a specific order but there was no strict numerical relationship between the concepts of “Rarely” and “Sometimes”.

3.6.1.3 Composite Variables from Transitional Practices

Transitional practice survey item responses were considered together to create composite summary variables. The resulting variables were analyzed by parametric or non-parametric statistics with respect to different adolescent developmental needs approached by individual transition practices. Data were described for each of the transitional practices, the overall transitional practices scores and the developmental needs associated with the transitional practices, examining frequency and appropriate measures of central tendency.

Transitional practices that were categorized as student-specific were aligned equally to each student developmental need (e.g., physical, cognitive and social-emotional) and were represented on a matrix (See Appendix A). There were two transitional practices for each developmental need for prior to transition and two transitional practices for each developmental need for during transition. Because of an equal amount of physical, cognitive and social-emotional practice items for students, the interval values all had the same minimum and maximum values when respective items were added together. These data prompted computation of linear measures of central tendency (mean, standard deviation). The additional measures of central tendency were used to show the extent to which respondents vary or differ from one another (Patten, 2014).

Transitional practice items were combined and summed ranks along with frequencies were used to determine if *School to Watch* status or if a specific middle level grade level configuration, respectively, contributed to variation in the number of transitional practices used by the school. This supported research questions four and five.

Dichotomous variables represented *School to Watch* designation (i.e., No = “Not Designated” vs. Yes = “Designated”) and showcased related transitional practice item categories. The two groups (i.e., Not Designated, Designated) were compared against all transitional practice composite scores. For example, composite variables were calculated for each domain of transitional practice by using mean scores among practice items within their respective domains (e.g., values across all survey items related to the *Physical* domain were averaged to calculate the overall *Physical* domain score). When the transitional practice variables were combined together, a composite variable or summary variable resulted to describe the extent to which particular practice areas were endorsed. This caused data to transform from categorical to interval because

the summary variables were based on the sums of several related items. As a result, the statistics gained from this process helped formulate potential inferences that explained if transitional practices were more prevalent in a nationally recognized school or for a specific grade configuration. Patterns and summaries were compared and described in order to explain relationships between transitional practices, *School to Watch* status and grade level configuration.

3.6.1.4 Transitional Practice Ranking

Data were analyzed with non-parametric tests of ordered ranks in the form of Mann-Whitney *U* statistics, to investigate whether summed ranks on indicator variables differed between two groups, specifically investigating the prevalence of particular transitional practices that take place in schools that were- versus were-not designated with *School to Watch* status. The significance was set at .05. The Mann-Whitney test calculates the median, which was the best indicator of central tendency (Huck, 2012).

3.6.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

In order to gain a complete understanding of what transitional practices are currently used by middle level schools a set of three open-ended questions were included at the end of the survey. These questions were valuable because they allowed participants the opportunity to share additional transition practices they use beyond those listed in the survey. The three open-ended questions maintained similar wording but were altered according to each stakeholder (students, parents and school personnel). The open-ended questions were stated in the following manner:

- Please describe any additional transition-related practices that you have found to be effective with students.
- Please describe any additional transition-related practices that you have found to be effective with parents.
- Please describe any additional transition-related practices that you have found to be effective with school personnel.

Qualitative data were coded for the development of themes using the constant comparative method used in grounded theory research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The method provided a systematic coding and recoding method to better conceptualize from the individual qualitative snippets of data. The coding assumed an inductive stance where the codes, and eventually themes, emerged from these data prior to theorizing.

All qualitative data that were gathered from the open-ended questions on the survey were entered onto a spreadsheet. Using the constant comparative coding method, I coded key points that emerged. After all data were initially coded, the codes were grouped and conceptual categories were generated. Data were coded into multiple categories as indicated by the concepts that were tied to these data. Further, the categories were examined for inclusivity of data. Emerging concepts were used to help formulate a better understanding of participant responses.

Constant comparative coding helped reveal patterns that existed among these data. This emergent approach used note taking and coding to find themes, sorting information into meaningful patterns, and allowed me to theorize and creatively explain what had been uncovered from these data. Data were reported by means of tables and narratives.

In order to make interpretations, I also draw from personal experiences as an educational leader. As I make those interpretations in chapters four and five, I am systematically qualifying them as coming from my professional knowledge and experience.

3.7 DELIMITATIONS

I established several boundaries for this study; therefore, the following delimitations existed:

1. The study was conducted during the 2014-2015 school year.
2. Study participants were limited to those who serve in the capacity of a public middle level principal in the state of Pennsylvania. This condition restricted the amount of participants who were eligible to participate in the study.
3. The sample size was limited to public middle level schools that contain grade 6, 7 or 8 in the state of Pennsylvania. This condition restricted the population of participants who were eligible to participate in the study.
4. I personally designed the survey instrument used in the study.
5. Based on what principals provide me through the survey, I was unable to understand how transitional practices used with parents or staff aligned to the developmental needs of young adolescents. Survey data pertaining to parent transitional practices was not able to support research question three (To what extent are middle level transition program activities aligned to the developmental needs (i.e., physical, cognitive, social/emotional) of young adolescents?) because the specific content and implementation of various practices make that determination.

Even though these delimitations existed, they did not prohibit the continuation of the descriptive study. The delimitations listed above were important because they framed a specific sample population during a specific school year to be used for the study. Other stakeholders, such as parents and students have different participation and training with middle level transition. Their views are important and form the basis of another study. The delimitations did not restrict the desired data or prevent the utilization of the self-made survey instrument. No instrument is in existence that could be used for this study; therefore further research in this area would only enrich this topic.

It is also noteworthy to mention that the middle school concept, which is the foundation of the “teaming concept” for instruction in middle level schools, was developed in western Pennsylvania by Donald Eichhorn through his doctoral work at the University of Pittsburgh and project at Boyce Middle School in the Upper Saint Clair School District. Eichhorn forever changed the middle level environment by creating a unique school structure tailored to a unique age group. Since its development in the early 1960’s, many middle level schools have adopted the teaming concept in Pennsylvania. This provides further validation why Pennsylvania is a prime setting to investigate middle level transition practices.

3.7.1 Limitations

Although the research was carefully prepared, several factors existed that potentially could limit and influence the validity and results of the study. Limitations that were not under the control of my research included:

1. Participant responses to the survey were limited to their interpretation and perception of the questions at the time they completed the survey.

2. The participating sample was not reflective of the total population because participation is voluntary.

Transition activities in middle level schools are not mandated and therefore vary between schools and districts; this was a reason to pursue this descriptive study. The natural differentiation occurs because of the leadership philosophy of the school, the grade configuration, size and location of the school, the available resources and the knowledge that exists about transition by the educators in the building.

Overall, I determined a survey was the most efficient and systematic methodology I could use to obtain the research data. The survey is easy to access and requires little time for participants to complete which leads to higher participation. Using the survey format permitted me to gain information directly related to my research questions. Therefore, this research has become a resource for many schools inquiring about how to enhance their transitional practices.

Another impending limitation of the study was due to the quantitative method chosen to conduct the research. Deeper understanding of why and how the transitional practices are used could have been obtained through participant interviews. This additional step could have added important qualitative data to the research, providing participants the opportunity to explain the transitional practices in more depth.

4.0 FINDINGS

This chapter summarizes the findings from data collected from the on-line survey tool, providing a descriptive analysis of the responses obtained from participating middle level principals in the state of Pennsylvania. The chapter is structured to first provide a clear context of the study respondents. Secondly, data for each research question is presented. Lastly, qualitative data obtained from three open-ended survey questions is explained according to each stakeholder (e.g., students, parents, school personnel). Appendix F displays the frequency of response for each of the 28 survey questions that listed a transitional practice.

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which transitional practices are used in Pennsylvania middle level schools to best support young adolescents during the transition to a middle level environment. I analyzed results to determine what extent specific transitional practices are used in participating middle level schools in Pennsylvania, which transitional practices principals identify as most successful, how the transitional practices that are used connect to the developmental needs of the students and if the transitional practices that are used vary among the grade configuration of the school and the *School to Watch* designation of the building.

4.1 PARTICIPANT INSIGHT

Before examining participant responses to specific transitional practices used with students, parents and school personnel, it is important to recognize data relating to the perceptions that participating principals have about transition. This general information provides a clear idea of who the respondents are, providing a contextual introduction representing their beliefs about transition. Two questions included in the survey allotted participants the opportunity to share their perceptions of transition at the middle level. Both provided deeper understanding of opinions that participating middle level principals have pertaining to the topic of transition. See Table 2 for distributions of data collected from each of these survey questions. Inquiring about the importance of transitional practices and the barriers to implementing the practices added an additional layer of data to the research. It also provided some new data relating to the topic of middle level transition.

Although it is not possible to know that the perception of transition importance is representative of the entire Pennsylvania middle level population, at large, middle level principals in Pennsylvania that participated in the study believe middle level transition is important. On a standard intensity scale, (1 = Not at all; 2 = A little bit; 3 = Somewhat; 4 = Quite a bit; 5 = Very much), 86 (93% of participants), reported that middle level transitional practices were “Quite a bit” ($n = 44$), or “Very much” ($n = 36$) important. Only 6 participants, (7%) reported that transitional practices held a minimal amount of importance, with 4 participants reporting “Somewhat” and 2 participants reporting “A little bit”. I find it surprising that two participants reported that middle level transition practices were “A little bit” important. To understand these data more clearly, I examined the responses to other survey questions that those two participants provided. Neither of the participants schools were designated a School to Watch

and both were in rural settings, which may explain why these schools view transitional practices to be of little importance. Not required to be evaluated on their current transitional program in addition to the strong family and community involvement present in rural schools may influence their feelings about the topic of transition. The smaller size of a rural district and the leadership organization across multiple grades could also negate reasons of transition intervention. Perhaps, not surprisingly, because participants were completing a survey about middle level transitional practices, their responses were complimentary of the topic. For that reason, no participants reported that transitional practices were “Not at all” important ($Min = 2$, $Max = 5$, $Mean = 4.42$, $SD = 0.69$, $n = 86$). This feedback, though expected, does endorse the purpose of the research and strongly connects to the literature that was reviewed.

Participants also provided feedback as to what barriers exist when implementing additional or new transitional practices. Of the 86 responses, 66 principals (77%) reported that “time” was a barrier. This is not surprising because of the many changes that public schools in Pennsylvania have been required to implement over the past few years such as new state-mandated testing and teacher evaluation systems. Additionally, almost half of the participants reported that funding was also a barrier. Forty-one participants (48%) selected this answer. Twenty-four participants (28%) responded “lack of staff” and 8 (9%) responded “lack of knowledge” as a barrier. Twelve participants responded “other” to this question and 11 of the 12 added an explanation to support their answer. Of the 11 explanations, two stated contract limitations as a barrier and two stated that they experience a barrier because they are connected to a high school. Other answers mentioned varied barriers such as competing initiatives, lack of resources and being a small district.

With various reasons as to why transitional practices are limited, one particular response prompted further thinking and possible explanation. Being new to the principal position was provided by a few participants as a barrier to implementing practices. Currently, there is an administrative turnover occurring in schools. This is happening for multiple reasons such as baby boomer retirements, advancing degrees and moving into other leadership or education positions and unfortunately burnout due to the extreme demands of the position. Regardless of the reason, turnover can have a large impact on the transitional program of a school. Practices could be repeated and never evaluated year after year, delegated to someone other than the principal or completely changed and operated in a new fashion. Administrative turnover is a valid cause of inconsistency with transitional practices in middle level schools. It depends on who is leading the school and what they envision a transition program to include.

Table 2. Overall importance of transition practices versus barriers endorsed

Barrier	Importance*					Total (%)*
	Not at all (1)	A little bit (2)	Somewhat (3)	Quite a bit (4)	Very much (5)	
Time	–	1	4	29	32	66 (76.7)
Funding	–	–	1	17	23	41 (47.7)
Staff	–	–	1	11	12	24 (27.9)
Knowledge	–	–	–	5	3	8 (9.3)
Other	–	1	–	4	7	12 (14.0)
Total (%)	–	2 (2.3)	4 (4.7)	36 (41.9)	44 (51.2)	86 (100)

Note: *Column totals do not add up to 100% as respondents were able to endorse multiple barriers.

Principals' perceptions of middle level transition can have a strong influence on what transitional practices take place in their building, who they are used with and when they occur. Further survey data provides deeper perspective into these specific practices.

4.2 ADDRESSING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

I developed five research questions that served as the research framework for this study. The five research questions provided the foundation upon which the survey items were developed and the lens through which responses were analyzed. Each research question is supported by quantitative data. A presentation of the findings as they relate to each research question follows.

Three open-ended questions positioned at the end of the electronic survey generated qualitative data and described additional transitional practices that participating middle level schools in Pennsylvania have used with students, parents and school personnel. This additional data supports research question one.

A total of 158 comments were collected overall in the open-ended section from the three questions. Fifty-nine comments were provided in the section pertaining to students, 52 comments were provided in the section pertaining to parents and, 47 comments were provided in the section pertaining to school personnel.

Three tables that list the practices shared by principals are featured in Appendix G, Appendix H and Appendix I. Each table clusters the practices that are worded similar to those in the survey and those that are not.

The substantial amount of participation with the open-ended questions was uplifting as it showed support for the study and showcased that many participants were willing to share individual examples beyond what was listed in the survey. It also indicated that the survey had clarity and was not excessively time-consuming for participants to complete.

4.2.1 Research Question #1

What transition activities do Pennsylvania middle level schools implement for students, parents and school personnel before and during the first year?

As mentioned in chapter three, transitional practices were presented in a random order on the survey to control for survey priming effects (Lavrakas, 2008). For data analysis purposes, they were grouped according to when the practices occur (prior or during transition) and with whom they occur (students, parents or school personnel). Therefore, this research question provides multi-layered data. See Tables 3, 4 and 5 for distributions of each transitional practice.

Open-ended question responses further supported research question one. Sixty-one percent of the 96 participants answered the first open-ended question stating additional transitional practices that they have found to be effective with students. Several themes became apparent throughout the comments that the principals provided. The primary emergent theme that surfaced showed that quite a number of practices submitted by participants were listed in similar fashion to the practices that were already listed on the survey. The interpretation of this evidence may indicate the importance and frequent use of these practices. It could also indicate that participants did not understand what was required of them for the question or they felt it necessary to indicate what practices their school uses currently. Regardless of interpretation, the open-ended responses provided an additional layer of data. See Appendix G, Appendix H and Appendix I for further explanation.

For the student-oriented transition practice items that occur prior to transition, there is a consistent pattern of most popular practices reported by principals. Table 3 lists all practices in order of popularity and distributions of each practice. Four out of the six practices were identified as “always” implemented on the 1-5 response scale. Those practices include the most

common practice which is a visitation day for students ($n = 87$, 80.5%), as well as assemblies to feeder schools about the middle school ($n = 87$, 54%), a sign-up event for activities, sports and clubs ($n = 87$, 51.7%) and a presentation about adolescent changes ($n = 87$, 29.9%). These data were further validated from the open-ended responses that principals provided. The most common practice that emerged from the open-ended responses was for schools to offer a building visitation, move-up day or orientation to students and their families. Many comments indicated that they designate a specific day or time for students to tour the school, meet teachers and gain a sense of what their schedule may be like. Multiple principals commented that they provide time during the summer months for students to visit the building. Many of the comments were similar to this middle level principal's statement: "We allow self-guided building tours before the first day of school. Students are given maps and they may tour the building as they follow their schedule." Another principal's comment reinforcing this comment was, "Be willing to allow parents and students to visit and tour individually over the summer months."

Two of the six practices that occur prior to transition were identified as "never" implemented on the 1-5 response scale. These practices are student shadow days at the middle school ($n = 87$, 46%), which was the least common, and a summer program for students related to transition to middle school ($n = 87$, 40.2%). Overall, data indicates that schools concentrate a high amount of their transitional practices with students prior to transition occurring.

For the student-oriented transition practice items that occur during transition, responses were varied per transition practice. A bimodal distribution emerged for the transitional practice of providing an evening social event for students. Participants reported that the specific practice was both "always" and "never" implemented ($n = 87$, 28.7%). Three other practices were reported as "always" implemented, including, having an assembly for students about rules,

procedures and information ($n = 85, 87.1\%$), distributing an assignment planner ($n = 86, 82.6\%$) and providing an activity period in the schedule ($n = 85, 58.8\%$).

Providing an assignment planner is a practice that 83% of schools reported as “always” doing. This practice may be commonly used because the assignment planner is a tool is used by schools and educators to help young adolescents learn life-long organizational skills. For example, during the middle level years, students are traveling to classrooms, interacting with several teachers and generally have an increased amount of homework. Students need a place to record all of the assignments that they are responsible for. The assignment planner is essential for this task. Though there is a financial obligation to providing planners to students, in my experience I have found that an assignment planner supports students with transitional changes and teaches them how to stay organized. In my role as principal, I have observed that many teachers reinforce the use of an assignment planner daily in their classrooms by posting homework assignments and checking student planners to make sure the correct assignment has been recorded. The assignment planner can also act as a communication tool between school and home to help parents understand what has been assigned to students.

Having an activity period in the master schedule is another practice that aligns to the developmental needs of young adolescents and was reported as commonly implemented. Specifically, principals reported that they “always” provide an activity period in the schedule ($n = 85, 58.8\%$). I am supplementing the reader’s understanding of this practice with my professional experience. There is no standard method of implementing an activity period, so this transitional practice can appear in the form of a variety of activities provided by teachers to students during a designated period, advisory, character education, Response to Intervention and Instruction (RtII) and occasionally enrichment and remediation. In my observations and values

set forth in middle level literature, regardless of the structure, the activity period time allots students the flexibility to explore learning through different modes and assists teachers in educating the whole child.

Having a buddy system to pair incoming students with older students ($n = 87$, 34.5%) was the only practice other than providing an evening social event ($n = 87$, 28.7%) in which participants selected “never” implemented, making it a least common practice. The transitional practice of providing varied instructional methods that allow physical activity and movement was identified as “sometimes” by several participants ($n = 87$, 36.8%). Because both of these practices are somewhat curricular-related, this may indicate that principals and school personnel are experiencing a disconnection between written curriculum and classroom practice. It may require schools to provide additional professional development associated with differentiation and hands-on learning experiences.

Other common responses that emerged from open-ended responses included providing anti-bullying and positive behavior support programs, allowing middle level teachers to meet with feeder school teachers, providing a mentoring program, having school counselors meet with students, families and staff, providing advisory programs and having team building days at the beginning of the year.

An unexpected response related to preparing students for their high school transition. A specific response about high school transition produced new programming ideas by stating:

We have a transition class for eighth graders going to ninth for nine weeks where a high school teacher facilitates a computer class that involves student created presentations on the high school and differences. They are scheduled in the high school and visit classes and compare the differences and experiences.

This comment relates to the transitional work conducted by Jay Hertzog (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998; Dillon & Hertzog, 2008) and shows that there is a strong understanding of the entirety of the transitions faced by young adolescents. The transitional intervention sparks interest into further research on the transition from the middle level to a high school setting.

A few comments that were submitted were not directly related to the identified themes, but were interesting and unanticipated. One principal mentioned that the school utilizes a purchased transition program named WEB, which they found to be extremely helpful. The WEB “Where Everyone Belongs” program website (www.boomerangproject.com) indicates that specific training prepares students and staff in a middle level setting a yearlong program to follow to support all aspects of transition. A fee is associated with this service. Another comment stated that their school provides specific classes for students who are struggling socially and academically with the transition. A powerful and heartening comment from one participant reflected their leadership values by stating, “As a principal, I am extremely visible, especially those first weeks so students who need to ask questions or need help can get it.” There is nothing stated in the literature about principal visibility, but this resonates with me and is intriguing because it is consistent with the developmental needs of students. Only one participant commented that there were no additional practices to list in regards to what was previously mentioned in the survey.

Table 3. Responses to student-oriented transition practice items

		Percent responses					
<u>Timeframe</u>				Some-			
Item (<i>domain</i>)	<i>n</i>	Never (1)	Rarely (2)	times (3)	Often (4)	Always (5)	<i>Mean Value</i>
<u>Prior to transition</u>							
Visitation day to the middle school (<i>cognitive</i>)	87	1%	1%	8%	9%	80%	4.7

Table 3 (continued)

Sign-up event for activities, sports and clubs for students (<i>physical</i>)	87	7%	9%	8%	24%	52%	4.0
Assemblies to feeder schools about the middle school (<i>cognitive</i>)	87	17%	6%	13%	10%	54%	3.8
Presentation for students about adolescent changes (<i>physical</i>)	87	14%	13%	24%	20%	30%	3.4
Summer program for students related to transition to middle school (<i>social-emotional</i>)	87	40%	9%	17%	7%	26%	2.7
Student shadow days at the middle school (<i>social-emotional</i>)	87	46%	15%	18%	3%	17%	2.3
<u>During transition</u>							
Assembly for students about building rules, procedures and information (<i>cognitive</i>)	85	1%	2%	1%	8%	87%	4.8
Assignment planner distributed (<i>cognitive</i>)	86	3%	2%	5%	7%	83%	4.6
Activity period in schedule for students (<i>physical</i>)	85	15%	2%	7%	16%	59%	4.0
Varied instructional methods that allow physical activity and movement (<i>physical</i>)	87	2%	1%	37%	31%	29%	3.8
Evening social event for students (<i>social-emotional</i>)	87	29%	11%	18%	13%	29%	3.0
Buddy system pairing incoming students with older students (<i>social-emotional</i>)	87	34%	17%	24%	8%	16%	2.5

Three out of the four practices that are used with parents prior to their child's transition into the middle level were identified as "always" implemented. See Table 4 for distributions of each practice. The most common practice was having a parent orientation presentation prior to the new school year ($n = 86, 77.9\%$) followed by parent transition activity during the summer with students ($n = 87, 41.4\%$) and parent education programs related to transitional concerns ($n = 87, 33.3\%$). Fifty-four percent of the 96 participants answered the second open-ended question

noting additional transitional practices that they have found to be effective with parents. More than half of the responses submitted were related to offering an orientation event for parents, which indicates that preparing parents prior to the middle level transition occurring is of great importance. Coincidentally, this same type of practice was most common for the open-ended question pertaining to students. The parent orientation events that were described by principals were varied in context though they all referred to the same practice. Several responses mentioned that the parent orientation event would take place during the summer, while others alluded to a spring parent orientation or open house event that takes place at the beginning of the school year. Some participants offered specifics to explain the parent orientation details such as including additional staff members in the event, having a station-based format and combining the orientation with another event to increase participation. Overall, hosting some form of an orientation for parents was the most common response from principals. Having transition resources posted for parents on the school website was reported by the multiple participants as “often” ($n = 87, 29.9\%$). Ultimately, these data show that schools provide substantial transitional support to families as well prior to the transition into the middle level.

Three out of the four practices that are used with parents during their child’s transition into the middle level were also identified as “always” implemented. Having an open house for parents was the most common practice ($n = 86, 80.2\%$) followed by designated teacher-parent conference days ($n = 87, 69\%$), and having a parent volunteer group ($n = 87, 39.1\%$). Providing monthly newsletters to families was reported as a least common practice as participants selected “never” implemented ($n = 87, 31.0\%$). A bimodal distribution occurred in response to this practice, because even though 31% of principals never send a newsletter, the next most common response was “always” ($n = 87, 24.1\%$); as indicated in Chapter 5, these findings are ambiguous

because there are several ways to interpret this information. Another interesting finding that was uncovered from these data is that it was reported that more schools always provide parent education programs related to transitional concerns ($n = 33.3\%$) than have transition resources posted on their school website ($n = 87, 23\%$). Both practices require planning, but parent education programs require more of a commitment. Posting transitional information on a school website can be done during the school day and involves less time commitment, where education programs occur in the evening to accommodate parent schedules.

Another theme that emerged from the open-ended question pertaining to practices used with parents included various communication efforts that are effective with parents. Multiple principals listed communication practices they used with parents such as blogs, website postings, weekly updates, monthly newsletters and e-mail blasts. One principal's comment reinforced this theme by stating, "As a principal, I let parents know that they can e-mail or call me with any questions. I really put that out there during the seventh grade orientation."

Closely related to the communication theme, participants also shared that several types of meetings with parents are effective, specifically, hosting question and answer sessions prior to they and their child's transition. A principal commented, "Parents are able to ask questions related to their students and the changes that are normal for the developing adolescent." This comment relates to the transitional and developmental needs of middle level students.

Additional comments that were submitted included creative ideas to get parents involved in the transition process. Only one principal commented that they offer night classes to parents to help them transition to having a middle school-age student. Other comments included sending bi-monthly student self-assessments to parents, inviting parents to attend school events such as dances and athletic events and distributing schedules at the end of the prior year. These specific

practices require significant time to plan and coordinate which could be why they were stand-alone comments. When asked in a different section of the survey about barriers to implementing transitional practices, participants selected time as the top reason. Even though time was provided to participants as an answer choice, I believe it is a tiresome excuse. When looking at the big picture of transition, many of the best practices actually free up time because they prevent problems from surfacing.

Table 4. Responses to parent-oriented transition practice items

<u>Timeframe</u> Item	<i>n</i>	Percent responses					<i>Mean Value</i>
		Never (1)	Rarely (2)	Some- times (3)	Often (4)	Always (5)	
<u>Prior to transition</u>							
Parent orientation presentation prior to the new school year	86	3%	5%	5%	9%	78%	4.5
Parent education programs related to transitional concerns	87	8%	13%	23%	23%	33%	3.6
Parent transition activity during summer with students	87	25%	11%	11%	10%	41%	3.3
Transition resources posted on school website for parents	87	17%	14%	16%	30%	23%	3.3
<u>During transition</u>							
Open house event for parents during the school year	86	5%	1%	3%	10%	80%	4.6
Designated parent-teacher conference days	87	14%	3%	5%	9%	69%	4.2
Parent volunteer group	87	13%	10%	25%	13%	39%	3.6
Building monthly newsletters to families	87	31%	10%	21%	14%	24%	2.9

The responses to school personnel-oriented transition practices were the most diverse. See Table 5 for distributions of each practice. Out of the four practices that occur prior to transition, only one practice was identified by a sizeable number of participants as “always” implemented. The shockingly small percentage ($n = 85$, 36.5%) indicated that they provide staff meetings with feeder school personnel. This specific practice had the highest percentage of all

school personnel practices that occur prior to transition. Forty-nine percent of the 96 participants answered the third open-ended question providing and confirming transitional practices that they have found to be effective with school personnel. Providing time for teachers to meet with feeder grade teachers was the most common theme that appeared from the principals' comments. Many reported that this opportunity encourages teachers to share and explain data pertaining to students' academic, behavioral and social issues and accomplishments. A principal reinforced this practice by saying, "Connection with feeder schools gives us important and specific information about the new students that will be coming to us." Another commented,

Talking to the sixth grade team about the needs and strengths of the upcoming students is critical; ensuring that all necessary supports are in place from day one and not having to fumble around and try to figure things out is also very critical.

Two practices, distribution of transition publications and materials to staff ($n = 87$, 32.2%) and professional development sessions for staff pertaining to transition ($n = 87$, 32.2%) were identified by multiple participants as "sometimes" implemented. Participants further explained through open-ended responses that they provide some professional development on the topic of transition to school personnel in a number of ways. The professional development mentioned incorporated sharing printed resources, discussing whole child learning, having guest speakers and focusing on differentiation. Though the means of professional development were varied, one principal commented an important point by stating, "Be sure to provide reminders at faculty meetings and on professional development days." This comment emphasizes that the principal believes that the focus on transition should be on-going and a core value of middle level schools. Even though a few examples of professional development were mentioned in the open-ended responses, it does not account for the lack of professional development that was

reported by participants in the survey. Data clearly show that there is an extremely minimal amount of professional development taking place that is tied to middle level transition. This is of concern because there could be staff members working within a middle level environment who know very little about transition. These teachers could have been formerly student teaching or working in an elementary or high school setting in which their prior training would have not covered this unique age group and level of schooling. Providing professional development related to transition to new staff members and all of the school personnel as a whole can strengthen the support and valuable lessons taught to transitioning students. Once again, this becomes a responsibility of the school principal as their vision and goal setting direct the activities and professional development provided to staff.

A specific practice that a plurality of schools identified as “never” implementing is peer mediation training for staff ($n = 86$, 44.2%). For school personnel practices done prior to transition, this is the largest percentage represented on the table. This data indicates a relatively low level of transitional support provided to school personnel prior to transition occurring.

A varied response was received for transitional practices used with school personnel during transition. Two of the practices were identified as “never” implemented. The lack of popularity of these two practices, staff transition committee ($n = 86$, 38.4%) and staff book study related to transition ($n = 87$, 74.7%) may indicate that schools lack sufficient time and resources to do them. It may also be a professional development strategy that was not thought about by the principal of a building. Providing staff facilitated lessons for students about transition issues was identified as “sometimes” implemented by 35.6% ($n = 87$) of participants. The overall top practice used with school personnel to support transition is use of the middle school “teaming” concept ($n = 86$, 54.7%). Because the concept has been so well researched and is promoted by

the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), it is not surprising that many schools utilize this practice. According to these data, even with recent budget cuts in the state of Pennsylvania, many schools have not eliminated the “teaming” concept. This along with some additional staff involvement was further expanded upon in open-ended responses when participants shared that they provide common planning time and team teaching, increase collaboration among all staff members, get staff involved in building tours, orientation programs and summer transition activities and create opportunities for staff to meet with principals and counselors to discuss transition.

One of the most interesting comments that a principal shared through an open-ended response displayed how committed the school is to their students’ transition. The principal commented, “Each team of teachers submits to the principal their plan for transitioning students. The principal then reviews and is part of the planning process. This eliminates any gaps that may occur.” This practice is not stated in the literature and is one that involves a time commitment on behalf of the principal and teachers. Though unique, it does have the ability to strengthen the transition experience for students.

This specific open-ended question about school personnel had the most comments from participants stating “none”; meaning that beyond the list of practices in the survey, participants do not provide any additional transition-related practices to their school personnel. This is concerning because ultimately, it is the school personnel who work with the transitioning students daily. The school personnel, which includes teachers, counselors, aides, secretaries, custodians, food workers and bus drivers provide more support to each student academically and socially more than anyone else in the school. Also, these individuals most often support the neediest of students in middle level schools. Obstacles that could cause principals to not provide

more occasions of professional development on the topic of transition could be related to a stronger concentration on other initiatives, a shortage of time and/or resources or lack of training and knowledge about transition. This inquiry could provide for a fascinating extension of this research.

Table 5. Responses to school personnel-oriented transition practice items

<u>Timeframe</u> Item	<i>n</i>	Percent responses					<i>Mean Value</i>
		Never (1)	Rarely (2)	Some- times (3)	Often (4)	Always (5)	
<u>Prior to transition</u>							
Staff meetings with feeder school personnel	85	12%	11%	24%	18%	36%	3.6
Distribution of transition publications and materials to staff	87	11%	25%	32%	9%	22%	3.0
Professional development sessions for staff pertaining to transition	87	30%	28%	32%	2%	8%	2.3
Peer mediation training for staff	86	44%	22%	20%	10%	3%	2.1
<u>During transition</u>							
Use of the middle school "teaming" concept by staff	86	16%	3%	15%	10%	55%	3.8
Staff facilitated lessons for students about transition issues	87	8%	18%	36%	22%	16%	3.2
Staff transition committee	86	38%	19%	16%	9%	17%	2.5
Staff book study related to transition	87	75%	14%	7%	3%	1%	1.4

4.2.2 Research Question #2

Which middle level transitional practices do principals rate as most successful?

Principals ranked several transition practices that are used with students, parents and school personnel, prior and during transition as successful. An additional layer and linkage of data were uncovered when examining the student-oriented transition practices. Not only were successful practices identified, but also what practices aligned to adolescent developmental needs were found to be most successful.

The most successful transitional practice for students as identified by the principals was a visitation day for students to the middle school. See Table 6 for a distribution of rankings for student-oriented practices. Principals ranked this practice as the most successful and second most successful practice to use with students prior to their transition ($n = 49$, *Frequency* = 18). This was also the most repeated practice mentioned in the open-ended responses. In addition, this practice meets the cognitive needs of students because a visitation requires students to mentally process information such as the school layout, school personnel names and procedures related to their new school. Addressing cognitive needs was identified by principals among all of the listed practices that are most successful. Most surprisingly, a presentation for students about adolescent changes was reported as used by multiple participants but not viewed as most successful. This practice was not ranked at all as a successful transitional practice prior to transition ($n = 0$) and is the least used of the four practices that participants reported as using. The reason that multiple middle level principals did not rank this may be because the practice, even though it is used prior to transition may be facilitated by the prior school.

During transition, principals ranked having an assembly for students about building rules, procedures and information as the most successful practice to use with students during transition

($n = 51$, $Frequency = 9$), even though the majority of responses ranked the practice as second most successful ($n = 51$, $Frequency = 14$). Again, cognitive practices were ranked higher in successfulness than any other practice. Even though the two cognitive practices were ranked as successful practices ($n = 51$ and $n = 24$), these practices were not ranked as most successful in each of their own categories. For example, distributing an assignment planner, was ranked most frequently as fifth most successful practice ($n = 24$, $Frequency = 9$) in its own category. Overall, principals reported that cognitive practices used with students prior and during transition were most successful ($n = 143$), followed by physical practices and social-emotional practices (both $n = 40$).

Table 6. Rankings of student-oriented transition practice items

<u>Timeframe</u>			<u>Frequency of ranks</u>				
<u>Item (domain)</u>	Possible *	Ranked	1	2	3	4	5
<u>Prior to transition</u>							
Visitation day to the middle school (<i>cognitive</i>)	78	49	18	18	3	10	–
Assemblies to feeder schools about the middle school (<i>cognitive</i>)	56	19	2	4	7	5	1
Sign-up event for activities, sports and clubs for students (<i>physical</i>)	66	10	1	2	2	–	5
Presentation for students about adolescent changes (<i>physical</i>)	43	0	–	–	–	–	–
Summer program for students related to transition to middle school (<i>social-emotional</i>)	29	18	5	2	8	2	1
Student shadow days at the middle school (<i>social-emotional</i>)	18	4	1	–	–	1	2
<u>During transition</u>							
Assembly for students about building rules, procedures and information (<i>cognitive</i>)	81	51	9	14	11	11	6

Table 6 (continued)

Assignment planner distributed (<i>cognitive</i>)	77	24	1	2	8	4	9
Activity period in schedule for students (<i>physical</i>)	64	21	6	6	3	1	5
Varied instructional methods that allow physical activity and movement (<i>physical</i>)	52	9	2	–	2	4	1
Evening social event for students (<i>social-emotional</i>)	36	9	1	2	–	2	4
Buddy system pairing incoming students with older students (<i>social-emotional</i>)	21	9	2	–	2	3	2

Note: * Respondents who answered “Often” or “Always” were presented with the respective item on the ranking task.

Parent-oriented transitional practices had significant comparisons between practices used prior to transition and practices used during transition. See Table 7 for a distribution of rankings for parent-oriented practices. For parent-oriented transitional practices used prior to transition, principals abundantly ranked having a parent orientation prior to the new school year as the most successful practice ($n = 45$). In its own category, the practice was ranked third most successful ($Frequency = 14$). This practice was also mentioned the most in the open-ended responses. Barely ranked at all as a successful transitional practice was posting transition resources on the school website for parents ($n = 3$).

Even though having an open house event for parents during the school year was ranked most frequently as a successful practice to use with parents during transition ($n = 30$), it was overall ranked fifth most successful in its own category ($Frequency = 11$). Providing building monthly newsletters to families was ranked less than any other parent-oriented transitional practice. This data may indicate that newsletters may be distributed from another source such as individual teachers, teams of teachers, academic departments or the district. It may also indicate

that newsletters are an obsolete practice that has been replaced by digital communications and social media to reach a new generation of parents.

Table 7. Rankings of parent-oriented transition practice items

<u>Timeframe</u>		Frequency of ranks					
Item	Possible *	Ranked	1	2	3	4	5
<u>Prior to transition</u>							
Parent orientation presentation prior to the new school year	75	45	8	7	14	5	11
Parent education programs related to transitional concerns	49	6	–	3	1	2	–
Transition resources posted on school website for parents	46	3	–	1	–	–	2
Parent transition activity during summer with students	45	12	6	1	1	3	1
<u>During transition</u>							
Open house event for parents during the school year	78	30	–	3	9	7	11
Designated parent-teacher conference days	68	17	1	2	4	7	3
Parent volunteer group	45	6	1	–	1	3	1
Building monthly newsletters to families	33	2	–	–	–	2	–

Note: * Respondents who answered “Often” or “Always” were presented with the respective item on the ranking task.

Principals ranked school personnel-oriented practices the least. See Table 8 for a distribution of rankings for school personnel-oriented practices. They also shared them the least when given the opportunity in the open-ended question. Though ranked and mentioned in lower than practices used with students and parents, these data painted an extremely clear picture of which practices were identified as most successful. For school personnel practices used prior to transition, staff meetings with feeder school personnel was ranked most frequently ($n = 18$). The specific practice was ranked fifth most successful in its own category ($Frequency = 6$). The other

three prior to transition practices were not ranked with the exception of one participant reporting that distributing transition publications and materials to staff was most successful ($n = 1$).

Practices used with school personnel during transition were ranked in a similar fashion. Use of the middle school “teaming” concept was the highest rank practice overall ($n = 36$, *Frequency* = 18). This specific practice often influences a building’s layout, scheduling and core values, so it is not surprising that it was ranked most successful in the eyes of principals. Having a staff book study was not ranked at all by participants. Even though the practice can be a simple way to provide professional development, it does require a time commitment. As mentioned previously in research question one, there is a need for additional transition practices to be used with school personnel. Hopefully this data will encourage principals to initiate additional means of professional development for their staff through literature and or other resources.

Table 8. Rankings of school personnel-oriented transition practice items

<u>Timeframe</u>	Possible*	Ranked	Frequency of ranks				
Item			1	2	3	4	5
<u>Prior to transition</u>							
Staff meetings with feeder school personnel	46	18	1	3	3	5	6
Distribution of transition publications and materials to staff	27	1	1	—	—	—	—
Peer mediation training for staff	12	0	—	—	—	—	—
Professional development sessions for staff pertaining to transition	9	0	—	—	—	—	—
<u>During transition</u>							
Use of the middle school "teaming" concept by staff	56	36	18	10	2	2	4
Staff facilitated lessons for students about transition issues	33	8	—	2	1	3	2
Staff transition committee	23	3	1	1	—	—	1

Table 8 (continued)

Staff book study related to transition	4	0	–	–	–	–	–
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Note: * Respondents who answered “Often” or “Always” were presented with the respective item on the ranking task.

When exploring which transitional practices are successful and acquiring data, I began to wonder why some practices used by schools are successful and others are not. Who is involved, how they are managed and what practices are used play a large factor in how successful they are. If certain practices are not used because schools are not aware of them, then they would automatically be not ranked or ranked lower by principals. Communication between principals about transition is later discussed as an implication. It is also worthwhile to consider how the successfulness of such practices is determined. Evaluating the practices used in a formal manner such as surveying involved stakeholders and utilizing a committee to review current practices annually would help make this determination. Unfortunately, it was reported that transition committees are rarely in place which could mean that surveys would not be used regularly. If schools desire to prepare and support students, parents and school personnel with transition then they should establish a system to regularly evaluate and add to their current transition program.

4.2.3 Research Question #3

To what extent are middle level transition program activities aligned to the developmental needs (physical, cognitive, social/emotional) of young adolescents?

This research question required grade configurations to be grouped so that appropriate and meaningful comparisons could be made. This assured that the overall differences were consistent among all grade configurations (i.e., physical, cognitive and social-emotional are always true regardless of grade configuration). Grades four through twelve were grouped into four

categories. The "Elem --> Jr/Sr" category includes configurations where an elementary school led straight to junior/senior high school. It is impossible to know from this data, but in all likelihood, these districts had only one transition. The additional categories had two, three or four grades in a middle-level school. In these configurations, students would have experienced two transitions throughout their schooling career. Given all the different configuration possibilities, this seemed to be the best way to divide the grades into four adequately sized groups to represent various middle level grade configurations.

Unfortunately, once grade configurations were established and analysis of the transitional activities used in each grade configuration and their alignment to the adolescent developmental needs was completed, no simple inferential statistic could speak to the relationships sought after in research question three. This may be related to participant interpretation of each practice and the labeling of each practice with a specific developmental need. Multiple developmental needs could be associated with one transitional practice.

It was made clear across all grade configurations that transitional practices aligned to social-emotional needs were generally used less than physical and cognitive transition practices. Principal responses indicate that social-emotional practices are between “rarely” and “sometimes” implemented ($Mean = 2.6, SD = 0.95$). This result is of great concern. It raises the question of how these needs are being met. It also may indicate that social-emotional needs are not viewed by participants as a part of the transition experience. When comparing the two highest selected practices, physical and cognitive, on average, cognitive practices ($Mean = 4.5, SD = 0.57$) were more dominant than physical practices ($Mean = 3.8, SD = 0.81$) based on the overall mean scores. Knowing that physical and cognitive transitional practices are used in less abundance by participants than cognitive practices, leads to further inquiry of where these needs

are being supported. Literature strongly indicates that physical and social-emotional needs are equally important to cognitive needs. My interpretation of this data leads me to believe that participants view support with physical and social-emotional needs as coming from other areas of the school such as school counselors, health and physical education teachers.

Overall, there is not much difference in practice use among all grade configurations. The use of fewer practices aligned to social-emotional needs, at least as measured by these transition practices, is prevalent in schools regardless of their configuration or number of transitions a student experiences.

Table 9. Physical, cognitive, and social emotional practice domains by school configuration

School configuration	Practice domain		
	Physical	Cognitive	Social- Emotional
Elem. --> Jr./Sr.			
<i>n</i>	20	19	20
Mean (<i>SD</i>)	4.0 (0.74)	4.3 (0.71)	2.4 (0.89)
Median	4.1	4.5	2.5
Middle (2 grades)			
<i>n</i>	15	15	15
Mean (<i>SD</i>)	3.8 (0.87)	4.7 (0.50)	2.5 (0.93)
Median	4.0	5.0	2.5
Middle (3 grades)			
<i>n</i>	38	39	39
Mean (<i>SD</i>)	3.9 (0.82)	4.7 (0.49)	2.8 (0.94)
Median	4.0	5.0	2.8
Middle (4 grades)			
<i>n</i>	11	10	12
Mean (<i>SD</i>)	3.6 (0.89)	4.4 (0.56)	2.6 (1.09)
Median	4.0	4.4	2.3
Overall			
<i>n</i>	84	83	86
Mean (<i>SD</i>)	3.8 (0.81)	4.5 (0.57)	2.6 (0.95)
Median	4.0	4.8	2.5

4.2.4 Research Question #4

How do transitional practices compare between middle level schools that have and have not been identified nationally as a *School to Watch*?

Two significant differences surfaced when transitional practices of non-*Schools to Watch* schools were compared to the *School to Watch* schools. These statistics were the result of completing the Mann-Whitney test (See Table 10). The Mann-Whitney test is non-parametric, so the median is the best indicator of central tendency.

Transitional practices that are aligned to the physical developmental needs of young adolescents were more frequently implemented by schools that have been designated a *School to Watch* ($n = 85$, $Median = 4.0$, $P = <.01$). Also of statistical significance, student practices as a whole are more frequently implemented in schools designated as a *School to Watch* as well ($n = 83$, $Median = 3.7$, $P^* = .06$). All comparisons made are in the expected direction and therefore favor the *School to Watch* designation. It is important to note that *School to Watch* status is not a comprehensive category when compared to other school descriptors as schools have to apply to be designated.

Table 10. Differences of practices by *School to Watch* status

Domain	School to watch				Overall		P^*
	Yes		No		n	Median	
Student	11	4.1	72	3.6	83	3.7	.06
Parent	12	3.9	73	3.8	85	3.9	.49
School	11	3.1	71	2.6	82	2.8	.48
Prior	12	3.6	71	3.4	83	3.4	.11
During	10	3.6	70	3.5	80	3.5	.40
Physical	11	4.5	74	3.8	85	4.0	< .01
Cognitive	12	5.0	72	4.6	84	4.8	.23
Social-emotional	12	2.6	75	2.5	87	2.5	.52

*Significance of Mann-Whitney test of ranked sums, comparing “Yes” vs. “No” groups.

4.2.5 Research Question #5

How do transitional practices utilized with students, parents and school personnel vary by the grade level configuration of middle level schools?

Regardless of any middle level grade configuration, transitional practices for school personnel are focused on the least ($n = 81$, $Mean = 2.8$, $SD = 0.73$, $Median = 2.8$). As mentioned earlier, this strongly indicates a need for professional development related to transition. Buildings containing three middle grades were of greater participation in this research study than any other middle level grade configuration. “Middle (3 grades)” sample size for student ($n = 38$), parent ($n = 39$), and school personnel ($n = 38$) is much greater than other grade configurations and thus n scores in those respective practice focuses are greater than other grade configurations. However, the mean scores are so similar that I did not run tests of statistical significance. This is also referenced in Table 9 for research question three, where significant differences were not present for developmental needs.

Table 11. Student, parent, and school personnel practice domains by school configuration

School configuration	Practice domain		
	Student	Parent	School Personnel
Elem. --> Jr./Sr.			
<i>N</i>	19	20	19
Mean (<i>SD</i>)	3.6 (0.53)	3.6 (0.68)	2.7 (0.90)
Median	3.6	3.8	2.6
Middle (2 grades)			
<i>N</i>	15	14	13
Mean (<i>SD</i>)	3.7 (0.59)	3.5 (0.58)	2.7 (0.53)
Median	3.7	3.6	2.9
Middle (3 grades)			
<i>N</i>	38	39	38
Mean (<i>SD</i>)	3.8 (0.56)	4.0 (0.67)	2.8 (0.69)
Median	3.8	4.1	2.7
Middle (4 grades)			
<i>N</i>	10	11	11
Mean (<i>SD</i>)	3.6 (0.67)	3.6 (0.76)	2.9 (0.80)

Table 11 (continued)

	Median	3.6	3.8	2.8
Overall				
	<i>n</i>	82	84	81
	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	3.7 (0.57)	3.8 (0.69)	2.8 (0.73)
	Median	3.7	3.9	2.8

5.0 DISCUSSION

The following section highlights and reviews the significant findings of this study, including precise answers to the research questions, implications, recommendations for future research and conclusions.

5.1 SUMMARY

The focus of this study was to identify the transitional practices that are currently utilized in middle level schools across the state of Pennsylvania with students, parents and school personnel. To determine which practices are most effective and how they align to the developmental needs of young adolescents, participating principals' responses were analyzed. Additionally, the building's grade configuration and status as a *School to Watch* was examined to see if either influenced transitional practice usage. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What transition activities do Pennsylvania middle level schools implement for students, parents and school personnel before and during the first year?
2. Which middle level transitional practices do principals rate as most successful?

3. To what extent are middle level transition program activities aligned to the developmental needs (physical, cognitive, social/emotional) of young adolescents?
4. How do transitional practices compare between middle level schools that have and have not been identified nationally as a *School to Watch*?
5. How do transitional practices utilized with students, parents and school personnel vary by the grade level configuration of middle level schools?

Before conducting this study, a review of literature clearly indicated the importance of middle level transitional practices and strongly suggested having them in place for students, parents and school personnel prior to and during the school year (Akos, 2002; Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Deemer, McCotter, & Smith, 2009; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Schumacher, 1998). Literature also recognized the unique developmental growth transescent's experience as they transition into the middle level (Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, & Flanagan, 1993). The physical, cognitive and social-emotional needs of the young adolescent when coupled with the transition can trigger school related stress and anxiety (Akos, 2002; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eichhorn, 1980; Manning, 2002; National Middle School Association, 2002; Weldy, 1995). Furthermore, Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) identified transition programs as being an influence on success in school and contributing to improved attendance and retention. These identified themes from the literature review, partnered with my experience as a middle school teacher and administrator fostered my inquiry about transitional practices. Therefore, this study was developed to investigate what transitional practices middle level schools in Pennsylvania are using and relate responses to the

literature to measure who they are used with, when they are used and determine what may influence their use.

The data analysis of this study provided evidence that schools use transitional practices to support students, parents and school personnel; however, it uncovered there is not a uniform effort in place for use of practices with students, parents and school personnel or a consistent use of all transitional practice examples that I provided. This is an important finding because it shows that there is too much flexibility and personal decision-making behind the practice use and individuals are being left behind. Data presented in chapter four shows that principals view transitional practices with importance, yet, report time as a barrier to plan and improve the transitional practices they use. This is a contradictory finding because even though the practices are important, they are not a priority. These two initial yet key findings may further explain why schools use specific transitional practices and an inconsistency of implementation efforts exists between schools.

When investigating what transitional activities participating Pennsylvania middle level schools use with students, parents and school personnel before and during the first year of transition, principals reported that they provide more transitional support to students compared to parents and school personnel. Furthermore, they initiate fewer school personnel-oriented practices than with parents. This indicates that professional development is rarely structured around the topic of transition, and there could be teachers throughout a middle level building who have been educated very little about the topic. Because middle level certification programs have only been in existence for a few years and act as the only formal training method prior to teaching that would prepare an individual about the topic of transition, it further validates why schools should offer professional development in this area. The “teaming” concept was reported

as the most frequently used practice with school personnel. This surfaces even more concern that educators may only gain understanding of transition from each other through team time built into their daily schedule and not gain any additional information on the topic unless personally initiated.

The most common practice used with students prior to their transition is a visitation day to the middle school, while having an assembly about building rules, procedures and information is most frequently utilized during the transition. Additional qualitative data further verified that a building visitation or orientation event is a very popular and commonly used transitional practice. An additional practice that was reported as utilized by many schools is distributing an assignment planner. This practice can be viewed as a passive practice. Speaking from experience, there is more effort put into funding the planners than distributing them. The actual use and effectiveness of them is determined by each classroom teacher and family. It is not surprising that principals rated this practice as frequently used because planners are often used as an educational support intervention; yet, principals have little to do with the impact the planners have on student's success.

Similar to student-oriented transition practices, hosting a parent orientation prior to the new school year is most frequently used along with having an open house event for parents during the school year. Additional qualitative data validated this further as many responses stated that an orientation event was an effective practice they used.

The practices that were reported by participants and further mentioned in open-ended responses are for the most part archaic. These practices, yet noted throughout literature are practices that have been used for multiple decades. Though powerful, they lack a current edge and may require a modification that is tailored to today's students, families and educators.

School personnel-oriented practices related to transition are not frequently used in middle level schools. More participants reported that they “Never” implement several of the listed practices as compared to “Always” implementing them. Prior to transition, having staff meetings with feeder school personnel was most frequent, even though fewer than 40% of participants reported it as “Always” implemented. This practice also appeared as frequently used from the qualitative data. During transition, use of the “teaming” concept was most widely implemented. Overall, professional development on the topic of transition receives little attention. Distributing materials and publications to staff about transition and having a staff book study related to transition were reported as uncommon practices. More principals reported through open-ended responses that they have no additional effective school-personnel practices to share when compared to student and parent transitional practices. This creates a concern related to principal certification programs. Little or no attention may be given to the unique needs of each level of schooling because administrative certification programs are K-12. Principals may be unaware that staff may need professional development in this area, assuming that the school atmosphere and schedule support this enough. This also creates a huge issue for certification and hiring practices by school districts.

Principals’ ratings of the most successful transitional practices aligned exactly to the practices that were reported as most frequently implemented. Having a visitation day for students was reported as the most successful practice used prior to transition. During transition, principals ranked having an assembly for students about building rules, procedures and information as the most successful practice to use with students during transition. Similarly, for parents, having a parent orientation event prior to the new school year and having an open house during the school year were ranked as the most successful practices. School personnel transitional practices again

received the least response rate but aligned with the transitional practices that were reported as most frequently used. For school personnel practices used prior to transition, staff meetings with feeder school personnel was reported as most successful. During transition, use of the “team” concept was rated as most successful. Because the most frequently used practices are the same as the most successful practices it is astonishing that there remains such a variety of practices used between schools. It also causes one to ponder why some practices are not successful. Being aware of specific transitional practices plays a significant role in this. Without the comprehension of need of transitional support and desire to improve the current transitional program, new practices are not implemented and current practices are not evaluated. This is also an area that is not supported by individuals in leadership and hiring positions that lack middle level experience or background. This absence of leadership by the central office administrators, principals and teachers directly influences the use of transitional practices. Deciding to include a new transitional practice at a school with any stakeholder usually requires planning and resources including time. A pattern exists where practices are used if they are thought of, and if not, then they are not used. As reported by principals, having a staff transition committee is not common. Therefore, it appears as if the correlation between successful and frequent practices is because the practices have been taking place for quite some time and do not require additional attention or evaluation on behalf of the administration and staff.

The developmental needs of young adolescents are addressed through transitional practices at varying degrees. When examining all grade configurations of the middle level, transitional practices aligned to cognitive needs were most frequently implemented. This is due to the fact that the most frequent and successful practices used with students prior and during transition are both cognitive practices (e.g., visitation day, assembly about building rules,

procedures and information). Additionally, the second most frequently used transitional practices were also cognitive practices (e.g., assemblies to the feeder schools, distributing an assignment planner). Practices that address physical needs were less frequently used when compared to cognitive practices but more frequently used than social-emotional practices. Because they are not as frequently used as cognitive practices, it is concerning as to how students are receiving physical need support, specifically developmental information. A presentation about adolescent changes for example may be included in a health curriculum or could be delegated to parents because the topic is of a sensitive nature. This specific example, along with instructional methods that promote physical activity and movement and a master schedule that includes an activity period may require schools to reflect on how student physical needs are being supported. Social-emotional needs were reported as least frequently implemented within all middle level grade configurations. The practices, yet important, received the highest response of “Never” implemented when compared with any other transitional practice and developmental need. This responsibility may be addressed through school counselor services and not viewed as a transitional intervention. Overall, I suggest that school principals evaluate their school personnel, specifically the teachers and guidance counselors about their understanding of transitional support relating to the commonly not addressed physical and social-emotional needs of students.

When comparing transitional practices of middle level schools that have and have not been identified nationally as a School to Watch, unique findings surfaced. This information is opposite of what was uncovered from the research question pertaining to student developmental needs. Student transitional practices that are aligned to the physical developmental needs of young adolescents were more frequently implemented by schools that have been designated a *School to Watch*. Cognitive practices followed and social-emotional aligned practices continued

to remain least frequently used. Schools designated as a *School to Watch* would be interesting to investigate further to find out if their master schedule or teaching practices cater more to physical development. Even though there is a lack of statistical significance and responses were received in the expected direction, the *School to Watch* schools would be interesting to investigate further. These schools may structure their school day different, have participated in additional professional development or provide additional opportunities within curricular areas and extra-curricular activities to support physical development.

Regardless of the grade configuration of a middle level building, transitional practices used with school personnel remain to be the least frequently implemented. As a common trend in the study, transitional practices for use with school personnel appear to receive the least amount of attention, making them a low priority in the eyes of principals. Practices used with students remain to be most frequently implemented, followed by practices used with parents.

These answers are a result of the quantitative and qualitative data that was analyzed and examined. When compared to current research on the topic of middle level transition, the findings do match and expand upon several of the essential foundations that are necessary for an effective transitional program. While my primary concern was to explore what if any transitional practices were used by middle level schools in the state of Pennsylvania, it quickly became evident that transitional practices are valued and used in varying degrees to help students not only adjust to a new school setting, but to build a foundation of educational success. A more aligned approach to transition is possible by addressing the needs identified by principals which include an increase in professional development for staff members and using a more meaningful method of selecting and implementing developmentally appropriate transitional practices.

5.2 IMPLICATIONS

The research was able to answer the identified research questions, yet surfaced multiple related topics and questions to explore. Therefore, implications of the findings exist in the areas of practice, scholarly discourse and future research. It is my intention to share not only my research findings, but to advance work centered on the topic of middle level transition.

The conceptual framework presented at the beginning of my research informed the study design by identifying specific components of middle level schools and related areas that potentially influence a middle level transition program. The research questions explored each of these areas, revealing specific findings that are currently lacking or are absent, as participant's data indicated about their transitional programs.

As the focus of the study, transitional practices are the primary intervention for students, parents and school personnel during middle level transition. Literature recommends that they cannot be properly implemented without underlying knowledge to make them purposeful and support to evaluate and maintain their effectiveness.

The findings of this study have shown that three areas need to be focused on to strengthen and improve the middle level transition experience. Primarily, the education about transition received prior to employment and in turn provided within a school is currently at a minimal level. A greater focus on preparing middle level educators and administrators is needed along with a stronger and more frequent approach of professional development for school personnel.

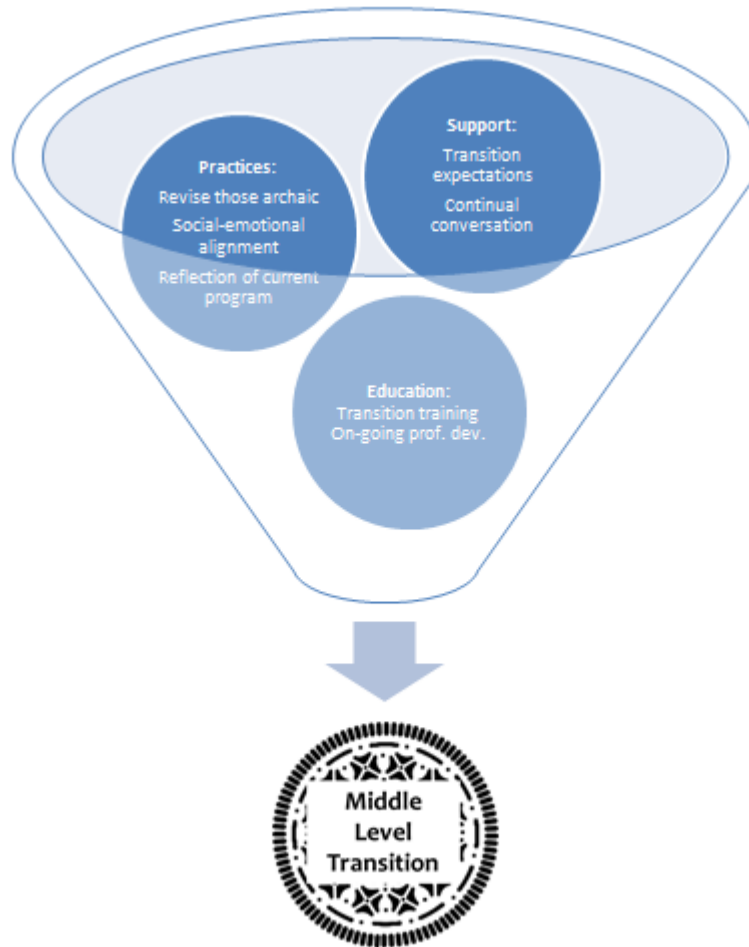
Having more educators properly trained and continually providing professional development about transition will naturally strengthen transitional practices. In this time of revision and development, practices need to be refreshed from the traditional archaic practices that have been used to support transition for years and cater more to the social-emotional needs

of young adolescents. Current practices and programs must evolve to fit today's students and society.

Finally, schools and principals need supportive frameworks to help with their continual efforts towards transition. Establishing transition-related expectations and creating opportunities for transition to be discussed has the potential to generate greater consistency among transitional programs.

Together, these areas have the ability to better support transitioning students, their families and strengthen school personnel efforts with transition. Each of these transformational ingredients are described in greater detail in the following sections as the implications address all areas represented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Conceptual Framework – Study Results



5.2.1 This Research in Practice

Middle level administrators are faced with the task of leading, implementing and evaluating multiple programs throughout the course of a school year. The multi-tasking requires them to prioritize the work and determine a level of involvement. Speaking from experience, some building projects become delegated and others operate in a systematic fashion based on what has occurred traditionally. Due to the fact that a significant number of principals reported that they “Never” use a staff transition committee ($n = 86$, 38%, Mean = 2.5), it can be assumed that many of the transitional practices used currently in schools have been done year after year with

minimal evaluation. If that is the case, principals can use this research to strengthen their current transition program for students, parents and school personnel.

Although this research is a starting point to better understand transitional practices used in my middle level schools, the findings of this study indicate that there is a need for schools to examine what they are doing to support their students, parents and staff in regard to transition. In particular, this research has uncovered that transitional practices are minimally used with school personnel. This research prompts administrators to reflect on what support they currently provide to their staff on the topic of transition and seek to provide new practices to implement with them prior to and during transition. Finding a means of professional development to provide ongoing training, education and discussion in this area has the potential to strengthen the core values of a middle level building. Doing so, could also potentially lead to more individuals getting involved with the transition efforts within a building and naturally cause a staff transition committee to form. Because time was reported as a barrier to implementing additional transitional practices, this strategy could support principals in strengthening and revising their current transition program.

Because of the varied extent to which each of the identified practices were reported as being used, principals could use the provided list of research-based practices to expand and improve their current transitional program. This list could also support schools in better meeting the unique developmental needs of transitioning middle level students. Since it was reported that there is a lack of social-emotional practices used in schools it would be beneficial to gain deeper understanding why. To remedy this, schools could use the suggested research-based practices to measure if their student transition program is lop-sided when addressing developmental needs or discover if they avoid such practices because they are too difficult to implement.

As stated previously, the awareness of practices can influence implementation. Principals often struggle to leave their buildings and district to connect with other administrators. Though these opportunities are remote, they represent an excellent time for principals to discuss their transitional practices with their peers. By having a means of communication for principals to openly discuss how successful they perceive their practices to be can support the middle level school population. For a principal who has never heard of or tried specific practices, this would be a way to spread the word and get more schools involved. These conversations could also take place at meetings, workshops and conferences hosted by the regional boards of the state association for middle level education.

5.2.2 Discussion of This Topic in Scholarly Discourse

The results of this research have connected deeply to the literature providing strong affirmation of the importance of middle level transition. Because the study was descriptive in nature, the results for the most part were reflected in the literature. Even with such strong connection, results from this research hold value and the potential to improve teaching and learning.

These data showcased that transitional practices are used in every middle school, but to varying degrees. A new discovery unveiled from the research pertains to the extent to which specific transitional practices are used and with whom they are used. The findings of this study led me to conclude that more transitional practices could be used with school personnel, which further questions how educators, including principals are trained about middle level transition. Teacher preparation programs and prior teaching experience vary; therefore, there may be disparity between what teachers know about transition and their efforts towards supporting transitioning students. This mismatch can ultimately impact a schools mission to provide an

environment that meets the unique needs of young adolescents, which directly connects to a child's transition experience. By utilizing current research, an increase in understanding and practice can surface. It is the responsibility of state officials, educational leaders and teacher educators to develop teacher preparation programs to prepare educators to be well-versed in specific content areas and student characteristics. Likewise, it is the responsibility of principals to provide professional development to assure that personnel in their building are working towards the same goals and are dedicated to student's needs. By providing a model to frame the essential components of a middle level transition program, there is an increased chance that all students will receive transitional support. This also influences every educator and school leader to operate under a similar and comprehensive vision. By aligning transition programs with research-based characteristics and best-practice models, middle level schools will be better suited to support their transitioning students.

Additionally, there were also some novel practices provided by principals for the open-ended questions that were not mentioned in the literature. Some of the practices were consistent with developmental needs but not previously documented, such as a student mentoring program with adults or older students and learning walks with paired grade levels. Each of these practices requires advance planning but can be extremely valuable learning experiences to support transitioning students.

5.2.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings of this study, I have the following recommendations for future research. First, related to this study, a follow-up survey could be distributed to inquire about a few of the

novel open-ended responses that principals provided. Since these practices were minimally mentioned, it would be beneficial to see if they are more widespread than suggested.

The transitional practices gathered as a result of this research can be used by middle level principals across the country, despite the fact that this descriptive study was completed using a relatively small sample of the total number of middle level school buildings across the state of Pennsylvania. The sampling used in this research was specifically aligned to the scope of the research, which can lead to some bias. By expanding the sample size and replicating the study across the United States, a stronger understanding of transitional practice usage can surface on a national level. By involving a larger sample size, an expanded statistical analysis could occur. In doing so, average practice implementation scores could be compared among states or lead to further understanding about why transitional practices are inconsistent and varied per school (e.g., principal knowledge and training related to transitional support, barriers of implementation).

A similar study could be conducted with the use of more open ended questions and an interview format with fewer participants. By completing an interview instead of a survey, principals could provide more specific details about the current transitional practices they use with students, parents and school personnel. Also, I would be able to ask follow-up questions and gain deeper meaning of the answers provided by participants. The interviews and additional open-ended questions require altered data analysis, yet have the potential to provide more information about what transitional practices are being used by schools.

It would also be of great benefit to conduct a similar study, in survey or interview form with students instead of principals. The student views on transitional practices would be interesting to investigate because they are the individuals who are experiencing the transition.

The feedback they provide can provide further measurement into the successfulness of the practices used. Their perspectives would provide new intuition and could help in better understanding if a socio-economic relationship exists.

Another research strategy to gain further understanding of this topic would be to perform a case study of one middle level building and their use of transitional practices. A case study would closely examine the process behind the practices, showing where the practices succeed specifically, where they break down, and why. I could examine all of the transitional practices used by the school with students, parents and school personnel and survey those involved stakeholders at the mid-point and end of the school year. Data gathered could assist in the evaluation of the practices used, specifically determining if there is a positive correlation between practice usage and student achievement, student attendance, parent involvement and staff knowledge as well as identify where any gaps exist.

A comparison study could be conducted between two schools that have both been designated a *School to Watch* in which both received a top score in the transition category on the *School to Watch* assessment rubric. The comparison would be focused on the varied geographic designations of the schools, specifically, one rural middle level school and one urban middle level school. A comparison of the two exemplary programs in different geographic designations would be investigated, with comparisons made about each specific school's student transition practices, family involvement and professional development for school personnel.

5.3 CONCLUSIONS

Reflect for a moment about the scenarios of Brenton and Zara. Each of these students' experienced varied levels of support during their transition into a middle level building. Brenton received less transitional support compared to Zara, therefore they both adjusted to their new school setting in different ways. Their participation in transitional activities played a significant role in their acclimation to middle level schooling and their success both academically and developmentally. Zara was more prepared and comfortable during her transition; thus, it is concerning that Brenton's transition was the opposite and his scenario is likely to be taking place in a middle level school, given the varied practices documented in this dissertation.

The transition to a middle level school is accompanied by a myriad of emotions and behaviors from students, parents and school personnel. Each stakeholder requires diverse techniques to effectively provide support and to ultimately serve those who are at the heart of the change taking place, the students. Students must be surrounded with supportive interventions and individuals to aid them in their journey from an elementary school to a middle school setting. Getting "lost" may negatively affect their overall school performance, ranging from academics, to peer relationships, to attendance and their attitude about school. These outcomes also hold the potential to continue into future years of schooling. The planning for the most appropriate transition program can be challenging. A middle level principal is faced with the challenge to decide how to meet the needs of these three unique groups of individuals while maintaining a strong academic program and safe school environment. This research is a starting point to gain deeper understanding of middle level transitional practices and how they apply and are used with students, parents and school personnel.

Experts in the field of middle level education have identified several best practices that schools can utilize to support those involved with the transition into a middle level school setting. Such organizations as The Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform and the U.S. Department of Education have provided services and resources to aid in planning, educating and evaluating middle level transitional practices. Yet, even with such resources in place, this study uncovered inconsistency in transitional practice usage across middle level buildings in the state of Pennsylvania. It is encouraging to know that transitional practices were viewed in large measure as important and for the most part are only partially neglected because of time constraints. Commonly, unless mandated, many programs suffer because of this similar issue. Though, most schools, regardless of their size, demographic designation, national recognition and grade configuration vary greatly in the amount of transitional support they implement.

As previously mentioned, several questions surfaced from data gathered from this research. At the same time, it prompted me to interpret what was not mentioned, which has led me to further analysis.

I find it extremely surprising that there were not more non-traditional practices mentioned from participants for the open-ended questions. In a day and age where technology plays a leading role in schools and social media is a familiar and frequently used communication tool for students and families, one would think that those technological means would be utilized to support a transition program. Other than computerized programs that aid students with career exploration, the use of technology-based transitional practices were never mentioned by participants. The practices mentioned by participants were not only repeated from the literature-based list provided in the survey but were also practices archaic in nature. There is some benefit

to these practices as literature indicates, but there is no defensible reason why schools should continue to do these same practices year after year with minimal revision. Practices should be designed with current flair. I do not believe that we should settle for past practice and assume that the transitional practices used decades ago are suitable for today's students, parents and school personnel.

Middle level educators pride themselves on teaching to the whole child, yet, when closely examining how the developmental needs of students are met through transitional practices many are falling short of meeting those needs. At this critical age of development, students experience an increased amount of change. For the most part and as reported by participants, transitional practices paired with everyday classroom lessons greatly support the cognitive development of young adolescents. Unfortunately, the physical and social-emotional development is not catered to as formally. Because they are so varied per student and usually difficult to address and support, I interpret that these developmental needs are delegated for others to support and rarely structured into transitional practices. Students are at a fragile state during their time in the middle level and are usually more concerned about their physical appearance and social life than their cognitive abilities. This realization leads me to believe that schools' transition programs are lopsided and should be redesigned to incorporate practices to support these delicate and very significant developmental needs.

I also question why principals are not providing substantial professional development to school personnel about transition. Something must be holding them back from these efforts other than time. My interpretation of this finding is that principals are not comfortable enough themselves with the topic of transition because of their previous training and experience. Therefore, they may not know what to provide to staff. They may also not realize that there are

educators in their schools who have never received any support regarding transitioning students. Knowing that the majority of participating principals view transition as important, it is my hope that they will not settle for a transition program that does not support all stakeholders and is continually focused on and evaluated as a building priority.

Given the strong understanding that school principals and personnel have in regards to the unique needs that young adolescents have when entering middle level grades, it is surprising that such a vast degree of transitional practices are used by schools. Even though all schools work to support their students, families and staff to the best of their ability, it is my hope that the listing of transitional practices and the survey tool used for this study will spark new interest and or reflection for middle level principals and act as a foundation for future studies pertaining to middle level transition.

APPENDIX A

Table 12. Survey question alignment chart

Survey Question	Question Type or Stakeholder	Prior or During Transition	Associated Developmental Need	Research Question(s)
What grades are in your building? (Select all that apply)4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12	Demographic Q.	N/A	N/A	5
Which demographic designation best describes your school? Rural, Suburban, Urban, Other	Geographic Q.	N/A	N/A	N/A
How many students attend your school? 0-200, 201-400, 401-600, 601-800, 801-1000, 1001-1200, 1201-1400	Demographic Q.	N/A	N/A	N/A
Is your school currently designated or re-designated a School to Watch (as deemed by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades and the Pennsylvania Association for Middle Level Education)? Yes, No, Don't Know	Demographic Q.	N/A	N/A	4
What are barriers to implementing additional and new transitional practices? Time, Funding, Lack of Staff, Lack of Knowledge, Other	Additional Info.	N/A	N/A	N/A
How important do you think middle school transition practices are? Not at all, A little bit, Somewhat, Quite a bit, Very much	Additional Info.	N/A	N/A	N/A

Table 12 (continued)

<p>You ranked the following transitional practices as "Often" or "Always" implemented. Select up to five practices from the list below that you believe have been the most successful. Then rank them by "dragging and dropping" them in order of their success.</p> <p>1 = most successful 2 = second most successful 3 = third most successful 4 = fourth most successful 5 = fifth most successful</p>	Students, Parents, School Personnel	N/A	N/A	2
To what degree are the following transitional practices implemented in your building? Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, Always				
Visitation day for students to the middle school	Students	Prior	Cognitive	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Presentation for students about adolescent changes	Students	Prior	Physical	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Assemblies to feeder schools about the middle school	Students	Prior	Cognitive	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Sign-up event for activities, sports and clubs for students	Students	Prior	Physical	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Student shadow days at the middle school	Students	Prior	Social- Emotional	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Summer program for students related to transition to middle school	Students	Prior	Social- Emotional	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Assignment planner distributed	Students	During	Cognitive	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Buddy system pairing incoming students with older students	Students	During	Social-Emot.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Assembly for students about building rules, procedures and information	Students	During	Cognitive	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Varied instructional methods that allow physical activity and movement	Students	During	Physical	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Activity period in schedule for students	Students	During	Physical	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Evening social event for students	Students	During	Social- Emotional	1, 2, 3, 4,5

Table 12 (continued)

Parent orientation presentation prior to the new school year	Parents	Prior	All	1, 2, 3, 4,5
Transition resources posted on school website for parents	Parents	Prior	All	1, 2, 3, 4,5
Parent transition activity during summer with students	Parents	Prior	All	1, 2, 3, 4,5
Parent education programs related to transitional concerns	Parents	Prior	All	1, 2, 3, 4,5
Open house event for parents during the school year	Parents	During	All	1, 2, 3, 4,5
Parent volunteer group	Parents	During	All	1, 2, 3, 4,5
Building monthly newsletters to families	Parents	During	All	1, 2, 3, 4,5
Designated parent-teacher conference days	Parents	During	All	1, 2, 3, 4,5
Staff meetings with feeder school personnel	School personnel	Prior	All	1, 2, 3, 4,5
Professional development sessions for staff pertaining to transition	School personnel	Prior	All	1, 2, 3, 4,5
Distribution of transition publications and materials to staff	School personnel	Prior	All	1, 2, 3, 4,5
Peer mediation training for staff	School personnel	Prior	All	1, 2, 3, 4,5
Staff facilitated lessons for students about transition issues	School personnel	During	All	1, 2, 3, 4,5
Use of the middle school "teaming" concept by staff	School personnel	During	All	1, 2, 3, 4,5
Staff book study related to transition	School personnel	During	All	1, 2, 3, 4,5
Staff transition committee	School personnel	During	All	1, 2, 3, 4,5
OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS (Address all stakeholders, prior/during transition and all research questions)				

Table 12 (continued)

Please describe any additional transition-related practices that you have found to be effective with students.
Please describe any additional transition-related practices that you have found to be effective with parents.
Please describe any additional transition-related practices that you have found to be effective with school personnel.

APPENDIX B

PRINCIPAL INVITE

Dear Middle School Principal,

My name is Andrea Peck, and I am the principal at Seneca Valley Middle School in the Seneca Valley School District. I also currently attend the University of Pittsburgh as a doctoral student working to complete my dissertation on *Middle School Transition*.

The purpose of my research is to explore the various transitional practices used by middle schools in the state of Pennsylvania. In addition, I will be determining how the transitional practices that are used connect to the developmental needs (physical, cognitive and social-emotional) of young adolescents. For that reason, I am contacting public middle school principals in Pennsylvania and requesting the completion of an electronic survey. I am hoping that you will be able to provide me some insight into the transitional practices you utilize in your school with students, parents and school personnel.

If you are willing to participate, the survey will ask about your schools' demographic information (e.g., grade level configuration, demographic designation, recognition as a School to Watch), as well as your use of transition practices with or by students, parents and school personnel. There are no foreseeable risks associated with this project, nor are there any direct benefits to you, other than reflection to potentially support or modify the transitional program at your school. This is a confidential survey and results will be kept in a secure location that only the researcher can access. Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the project at any time.

As a middle school principal, I know how very busy you are on a daily basis. I would greatly appreciate your willingness to participate in this study. The survey should take you no longer than 15 minutes.

Please click the following link to begin the online survey:
https://jfe.qualtrics.com/preview/SV_2bs3qICOcP5pd3L

If you have any questions about this process, please contact me either by phone 412.585.1678 or via e-mail: awp11@pitt.edu.

Thank you for your anticipated help with my study.

Educationally,

Andrea Peck
Doctoral Student
University of Pittsburgh

APPENDIX C

PRINCIPAL FOLLOW-UP

Dear Middle School Principal,

I recently contacted you requesting your participation in an online survey to explore the various transitional practices used by middle schools in the state of Pennsylvania. I am excited to include your valuable feedback in my research study.

If at all possible, I would appreciate your survey participation. The survey will be available until 12/2/14. The survey should take you no longer than 15 minutes.

Please click the following link to begin the online survey:

https://jfe.qualtrics.com/preview/SV_2bs3qICOcP5pd3L

Again, thank you for assisting with my data collection as I complete my dissertation through the University of Pittsburgh. Your professional insight is significant and is the heart of this study.

If you have any questions about this process, please do not hesitate to contact me either by phone 412.585.1678 or via e-mail: awp11@pitt.edu.

Thank you for your help.

Educationally,

Andrea Peck
Doctoral Student
University of Pittsburgh

APPENDIX D

SCHOOL TO WATCH PRINCIPAL INVITE

Dear Middle School Principal,

I am contacting you because your school has been nationally recognized as a School to Watch. Knowing that your building serves as an exemplary example of middle level education, I am requesting for you to share some of your success and best practice.

My name is Andrea Peck, and I am the principal at Seneca Valley Middle School in the Seneca Valley School District, which has recently been re-designated a School to Watch. I also currently attend the University of Pittsburgh as a doctoral student working to complete my dissertation on *Middle School Transition*.

The purpose of my research is to explore the various transitional practices used by middle schools in the state of Pennsylvania. In addition, I will be determining how the transitional practices that are used connect to the developmental needs (physical, cognitive and social-emotional) of young adolescents. For that reason, I am contacting public middle school principals in Pennsylvania and requesting the completion of an electronic survey. I am hoping that you will be able to provide me some insight into the transitional practices you utilize in your school with students, parents and school personnel.

If you are willing to participate, the survey will ask about your schools' demographic information (e.g., grade level configuration, demographic designation, recognition as a School to Watch), as well as your use of transition practices with or by students, parents and school personnel. There are no foreseeable risks associated with this project, nor are there any direct benefits to you, other than reflection to potentially support or modify the transitional program at your school. This is a confidential survey and results will be kept in a secure location that only the researcher can access. Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the project at any time.

As a middle school principal, I know how very busy you are on a daily basis. I would greatly appreciate your willingness to participate in this study. The survey should take you no longer than 15 minutes.

Please click the following link to begin the online survey:

https://jfe.qualtrics.com/preview/SV_2bs3qICOcP5pd3L

If you have any questions about this process, please contact me either by phone 412.585.1678 or via e-mail: awp11@pitt.edu.

Thank you for your anticipated help with my study.

Educationally,

Andrea Peck
Doctoral Student
University of Pittsburgh

APPENDIX E

Figure 3. Survey



University of Pittsburgh

The purpose of this research study is to explore the various middle school transition practices used by middle schools in the state of Pennsylvania. For that reason, I am contacting middle school principals and asking them to complete a brief (approximately 15 minute) survey. If you are willing to participate, you will be asked about what your school currently provides to students, parents and school personnel during the transitional period of middle school. There are no foreseeable risks associated with this project, nor are there any direct benefits to you, other than reflection to potentially support or modify your transitional program. Participants will receive no compensation for completing the survey. This is a confidential survey and results will be kept in a secure location that only the researcher can access. Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the project at any time. This study is being conducted by Ms. Andrea Peck, who can be reached at 412.585.1678 or awp11@pitt.edu, if you have any questions.

Click on the button below to confirm your participation and begin this survey.

You are about to begin this survey.

The statements that follow are about practices used with students, parents and school personnel prior to and during the transitional year of middle school.

Please indicate the degree to which the following transitional practices are implemented at your school.

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Staff facilitated lessons for students about transition issues	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Distribution of transition publications and materials to staff	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Staff transition committee	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Assembly for students about building rules, procedures and information	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Activity period in schedule for students	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Varied instructional methods that allow physical activity and movement	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sign-up event for activities, sports and clubs for students	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Parent education programs related to transitional concerns	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Parent transition activity during summer with students	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Parent volunteer group	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Staff meetings with feeder school personnel	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Evening social event for students	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Building monthly newsletters to families	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Peer mediation training for staff	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Transition resources posted on school website for parents	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Buddy system pairing incoming students with older students	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Assemblies to feeder schools about the middle school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Designated parent-teacher conference days	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Visitation day for students to the middle school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Presentation for students about adolescent changes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Parent orientation presentation prior to the new school year	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Open house event for parents during the school year	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Summer program for students related to transition to middle school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Use of the middle school "teaming" concept by staff	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Professional development sessions for staff pertaining to transition	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Student shadow days at the middle school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Assignment planner distributed	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Staff book study related to transition	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



You ranked the following transitional practices as "Often" or "Always" implemented. Select up to **five** practices from the list below that you believe have been the most successful. Then rank them by "dragging and dropping" them in order of their success.

1 = most successful

2 = second most successful

3 = third most successful

4 = fourth most successful

5 = fifth most successful

Items

Click to write Group 1

Please complete the following demographic information about your school.

What grades are in your building? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ 4
 - ☐ 5
 - ☐ 6
 - ☐ 7
 - ☐ 8
 - ☐ 9
 - ☐ 10
 - ☐ 11
 - ☐ 12
-

Which demographic designation best describes your school?

- ☐ rural
- ☐ suburban
- ☐ urban
- ☐ other

How many students attend your school?

- ☐ 1-200
- ☐ 201-400
- ☐ 401-600
- ☐ 601-800
- ☐ 801-1000
- ☐ 1001-1200
- ☐ 1201-1400

Is your school currently designated or re-designated a School to Watch (as deemed by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades and the Pennsylvania Association for Middle Level Education)?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't know



What are barriers to implementing additional and new transitional practices? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Time
- ☐ Funding
- ☐ Lack of staff
- ☐ Lack on knowledge
- ☐ Other

In your opinion, how important are middle school transition practices?

- ☐ Not at all
- ☐ A little bit
- ☐ Somewhat
- ☐ Quite a bit
- ☐ Very much



Thank you for your participation so far. Just three more important questions.

Please describe any additional transition-related practices that you have found to be effective with **students**.

Please describe any additional transition-related practices that you have found to be effective with **parents**.

Please describe any additional transition-related practices that you have found to be effective with **school personnel**.

APPENDIX F

Table 13. Frequency of response for the 28 transitional practices

Item	Response frequency				
	Never (1)	Rarely (2)	Some- times (3)	Often (4)	Always (5)
Visitation day for students to the middle school (cognitive)	1	1	7	8	70
Assemblies to feeder schools about the middle school (cognitive)	15	5	11	9	47
Sign-up event for activities, sports and clubs for students (physical)	6	8	7	21	45
Presentation for students about adolescent changes (physical)	12	11	21	17	26
Summer program for students related to transition to middle school (social-emotional)	35	8	15	6	23
Student shadow days at the middle school (social-emotional)	40	13	16	3	15
Assembly for students about building rules, procedures and information (cognitive)	1	2	1	7	74
Assignment planner distributed (cognitive)	3	2	4	6	71
Activity period in schedule for students (physical)	13	2	6	14	50
Varied instructional methods that allow physical activity and movement (physical)	2	1	32	27	25
Evening social event for students (social- emotional)	25	10	16	11	25

Table 13. (continued)

Buddy system pairing incoming students with older students (social-emotional)	30	15	21	7	14
Parent orientation presentation prior to the new school year	3	4	4	8	67
Parent transition activity during summer with students	22	10	10	9	36
Parent education programs related to transitional concerns	7	11	20	20	29
Transition resources posted on school website for parents	15	12	14	26	20
Open house event for parents during the school year	4	1	3	9	69
Designated parent-teacher conference days	12	3	4	8	60
Parent volunteer group	11	9	22	11	34
Building monthly newsletters to families	27	9	18	12	21
Staff meetings with feeder school personnel	10	9	20	15	31
Distribution of transition publications and materials to staff	10	22	28	8	19
Professional development sessions for staff pertaining to transition	26	24	28	2	7
Peer mediation training for staff	38	19	17	9	3
Use of the middle school "teaming" concept by staff	14	3	13	9	47
Staff transition committee	33	16	14	8	15
Staff facilitated lessons for students about transition issues	7	16	31	19	14
Staff book study related to transition	65	12	6	3	1

APPENDIX G

Table 14. Student transitional practices reported by principals for the open-ended question

Practices similar to those in the survey	Practices NOT similar to those in the survey
Building visitation/orientation (12)	Social/behavioral support programs (4)
Open/Summer visitation time/day (7)	Mentoring program (4)
Orientation night (5)	High school transition prep (3)
Counselor meetings/visitations (5)	Teacher meetings (3)
Team building day (2)	Advisory programs (3)
Activity night for boys and girls (1)	Meetings throughout the prior year (1)
	Student shadow the last week of the year (1)
	Use of WEB purchased program (1)
	Handbook and policy review in class (1)
	Grade level breakfast (1)
	Peer buddies (1)
	Career cruising program (1)
	Principal visibility (1)
	Character education program (1)
	Truancy prevention workshop (1)
	IEP/504 transition meetings (1)
	Back to school fair (1)
	Teaming concept (1)
	Parents involved (1)
	Extracurricular activities (1)
	Transition classes (1)
	Common planning time for teachers (1)
	Learning walks with paired grades (1)
	Pen pal letters between grades (1)
	Walking students around the building (1)

Note: The number of times the “similar” practice was stated is indicated within parentheses.

APPENDIX H

Table 15. Parent transitional practices reported by principals for the open-ended question

Practices similar to those in the survey	Practices NOT similar to those in the survey
Orientation event (26)	Involvement during last week of school (1)
Communication efforts (8)	Bi-monthly student self-assessments sent (1)
Summer orientation (5)	Attendance at school events (1)
Parent-teacher meetings (7)	Distribute student schedules end of year (1)
Q&A meetings and programs (3)	
Night classes about transition/middle level (1)	

Note: The number of times the “similar” practice was stated is indicated within parentheses.

APPENDIX I

Table 16. School personnel transitional practices reported by principals for the open-ended question

Practices similar to those in the survey	Practices NOT similar to those in the survey
Teacher-to-teacher meetings (12)	Summer transition participation (4)
Prof. dev./training/distribute info. (8)	Open house, visitation, tours (3)
Team teaching/common planning (2)	Staff collaboration and sharing (3)
	Meeting with principals and counselors (2)
	Team transition plans (1)
	Involvement during last week of school (1)
	Acad. Mentoring/student advisory (1)
	Walking students through the first day (1)
	Staff posters on classroom doors (1)
	Learning walks (1)
	Distribute schedules early to teachers (1)

Note: The number of times the “similar” practice was stated is indicated within parentheses.

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